THE REAL DIGITAL REVOLUTION

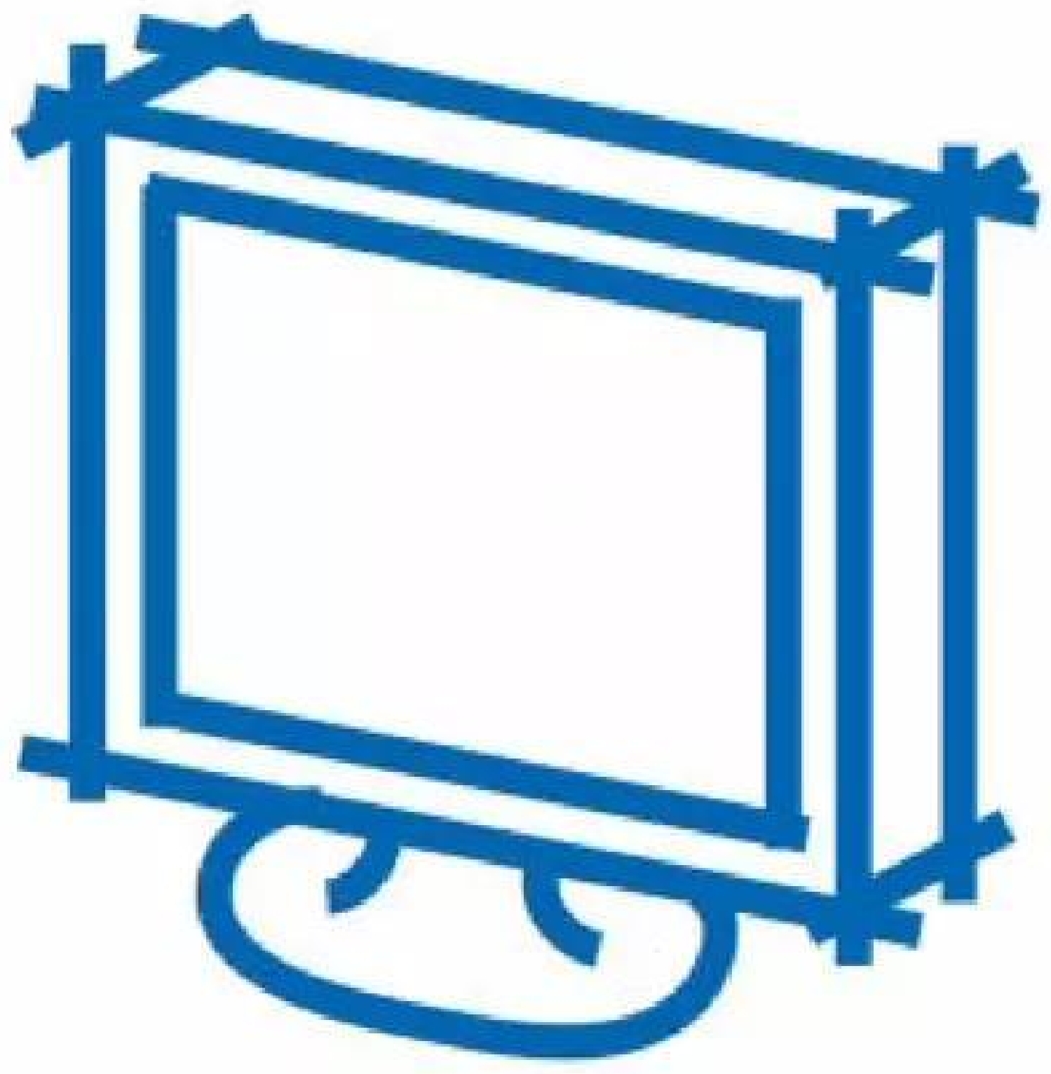
NewPhilosopher

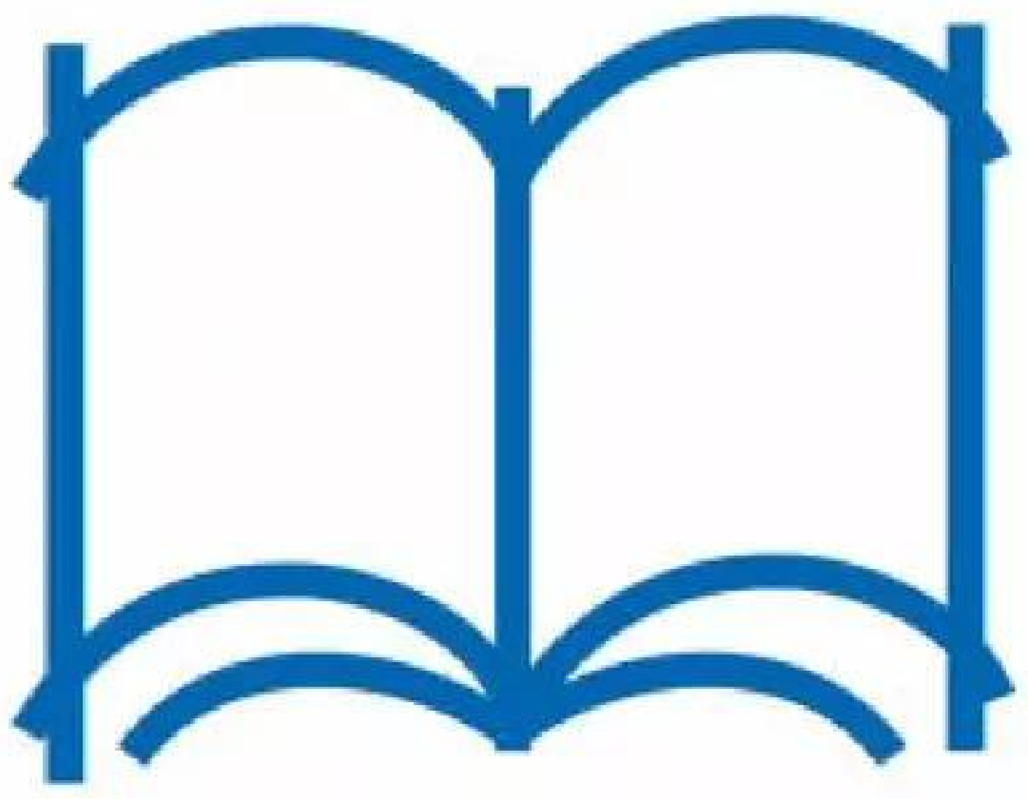
Technology and your brain

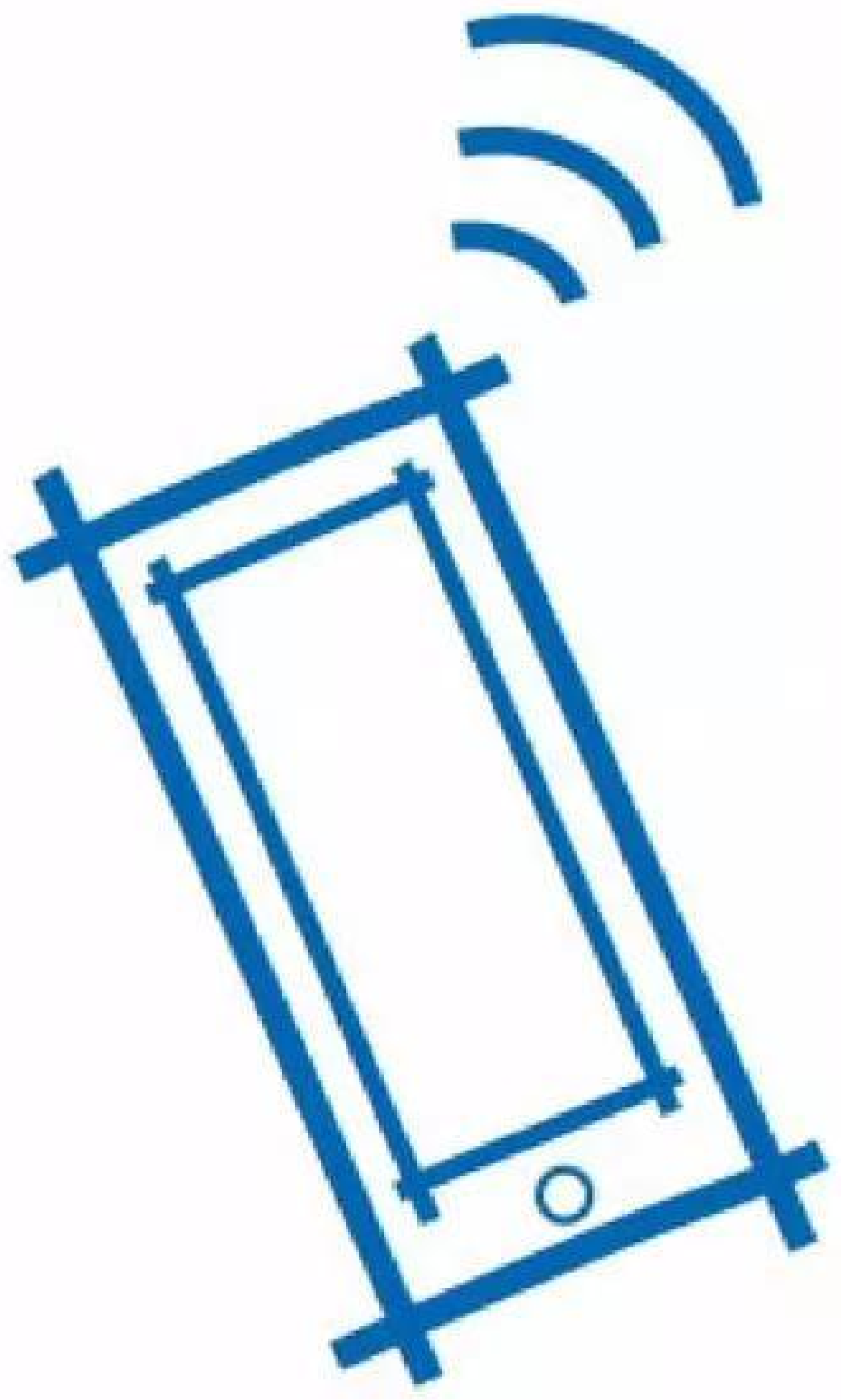
DBC PIERRE
Neandertron

ANTONIA CASE
Tune in tomorrow

OLIVER BURKEMAN
A frictionless existence







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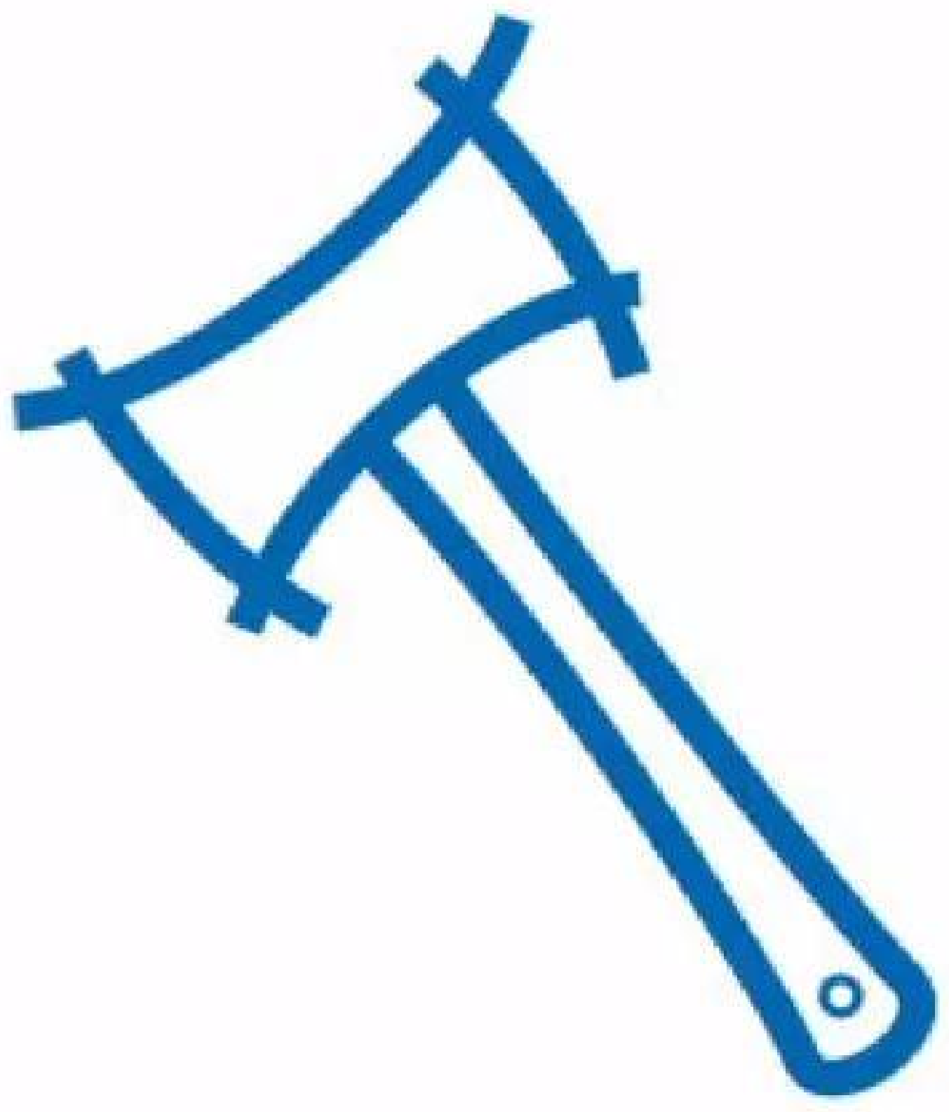
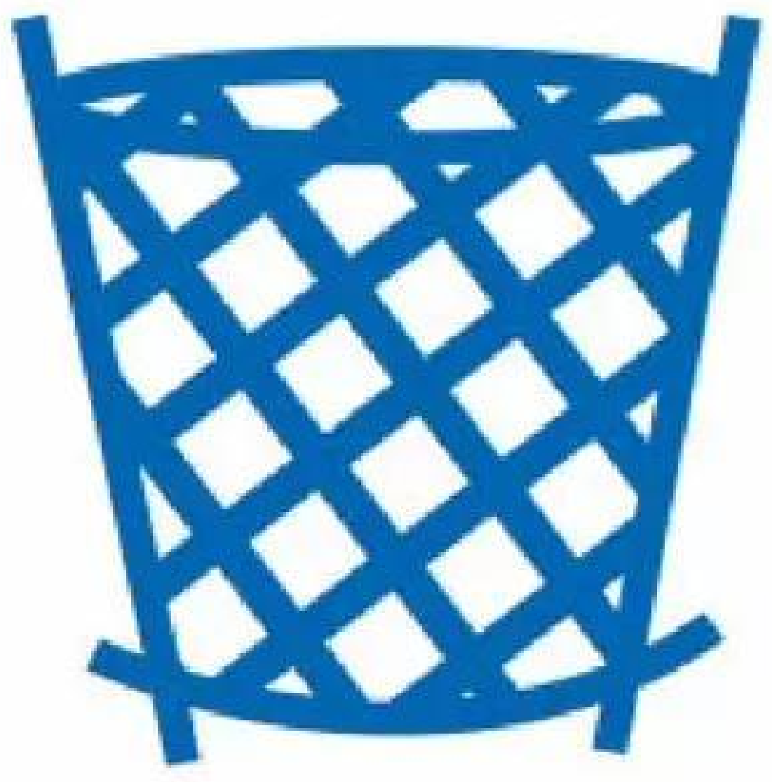

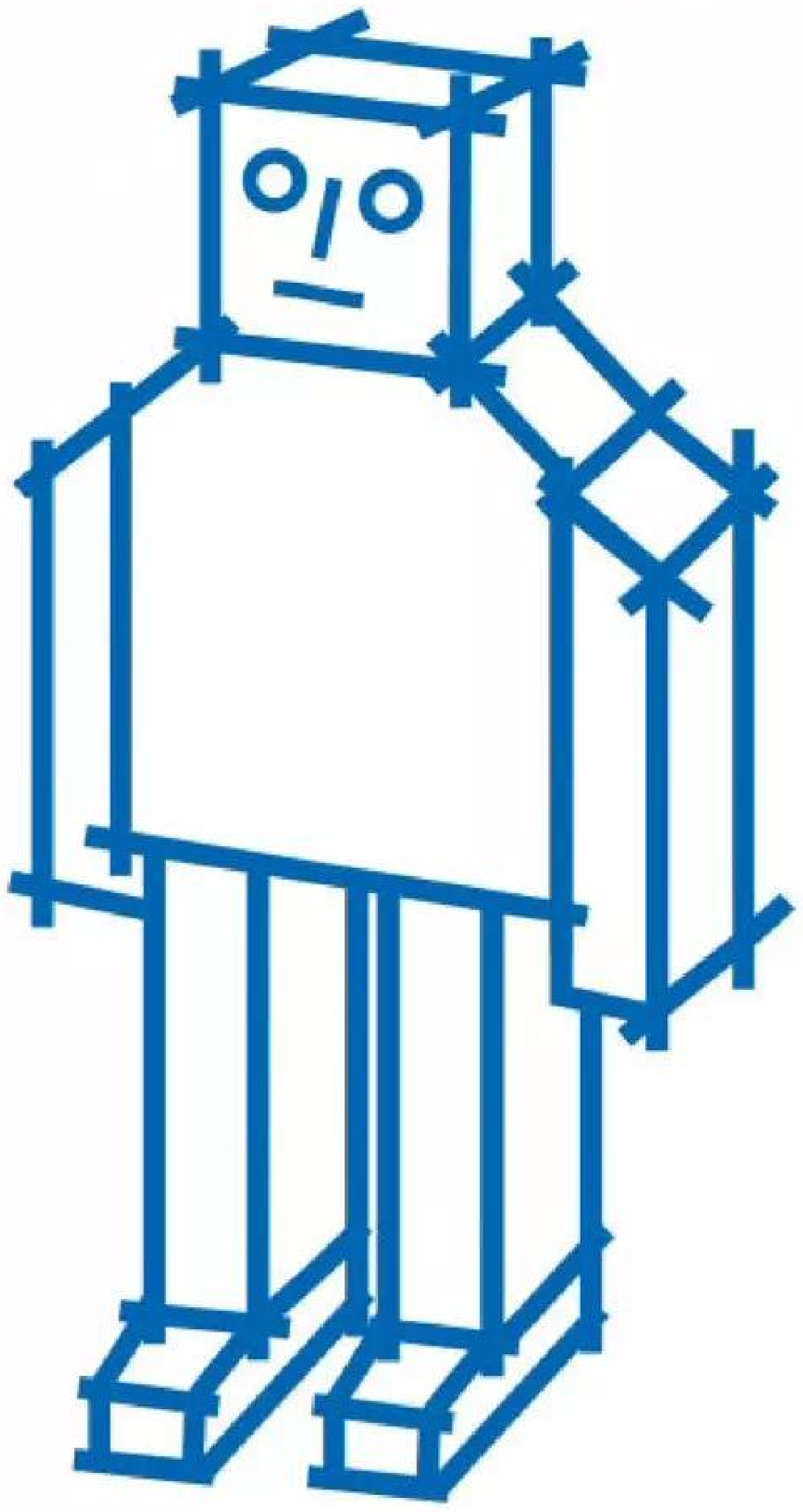

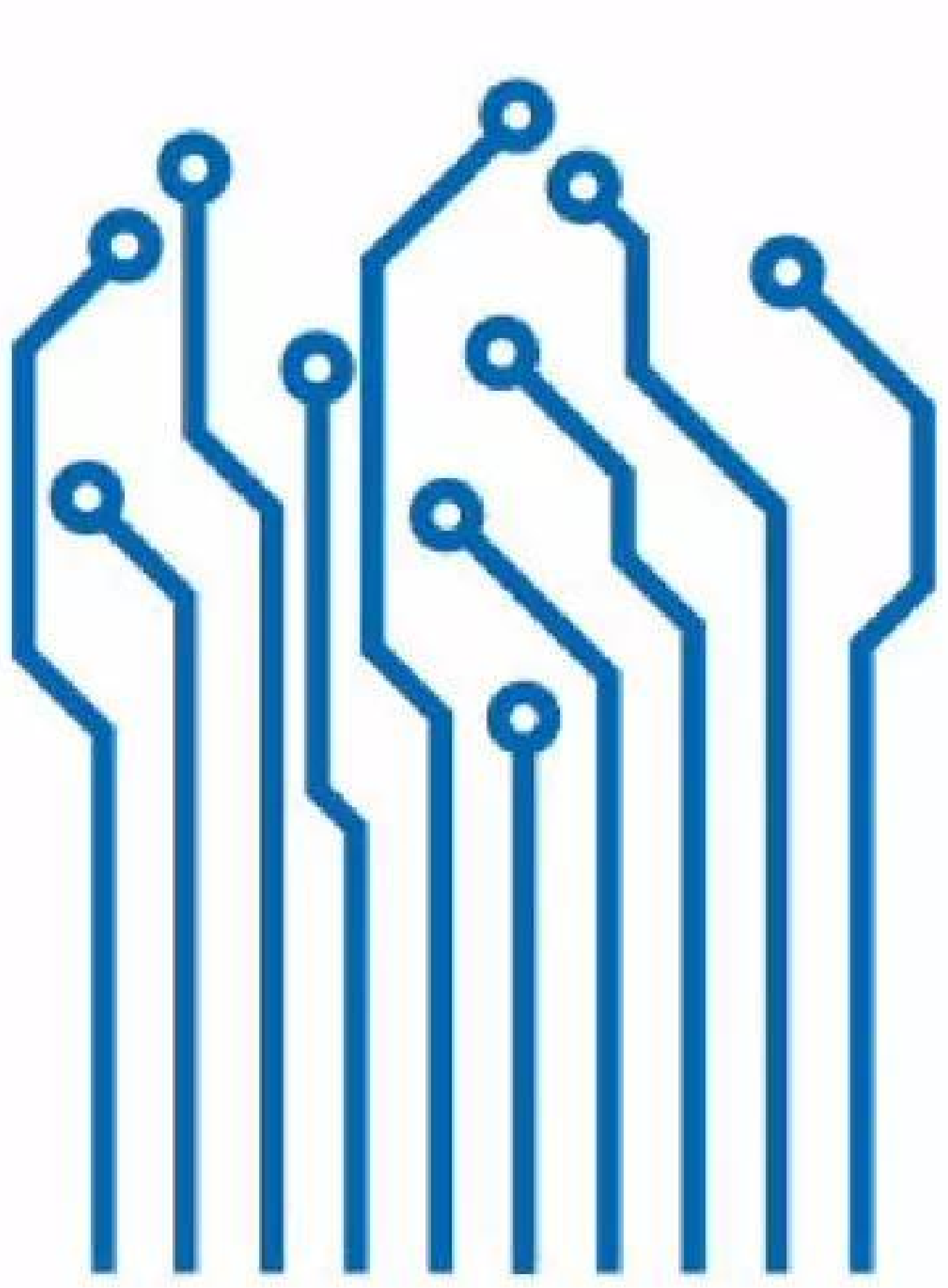

> **"The real problem is not whether machines think but whether men do."**
>
> **B.F. Skinner**

#11 Technology

Technology, in one form or another, has been part of human life since time immemorial. Early inventors developed flints and axes, wheels and pulleys, presses and pens, engines and electricity; and early adopters reaped the rewards – cutting, rolling, learning, and powering their way ahead of the pack.

Thanks to the technologies of earlier eras, much of the modern world gained access to clean water and abundant food, was safeguarded from many crippling diseases, could communicate freely and widely, and was granted admittance to a library that would have made an enlightenment thinker gasp.

With the technologies of today, we're undoing centuries of work: we're polluting the water and destroying the land, we're awash with disorders of the mind, we're contacting without communicating, and we're using our plenitudinous library – the Internet – to watch videos featuring funny felines.

Yes, we have access to those earlier technologies, and better ones still, yet we're using them to – as Neil Postman put it some 30 years ago – amuse ourselves to death.

Zan Boag

Zan Boag
Editor, *New Philosopher*

NewPhilosopher

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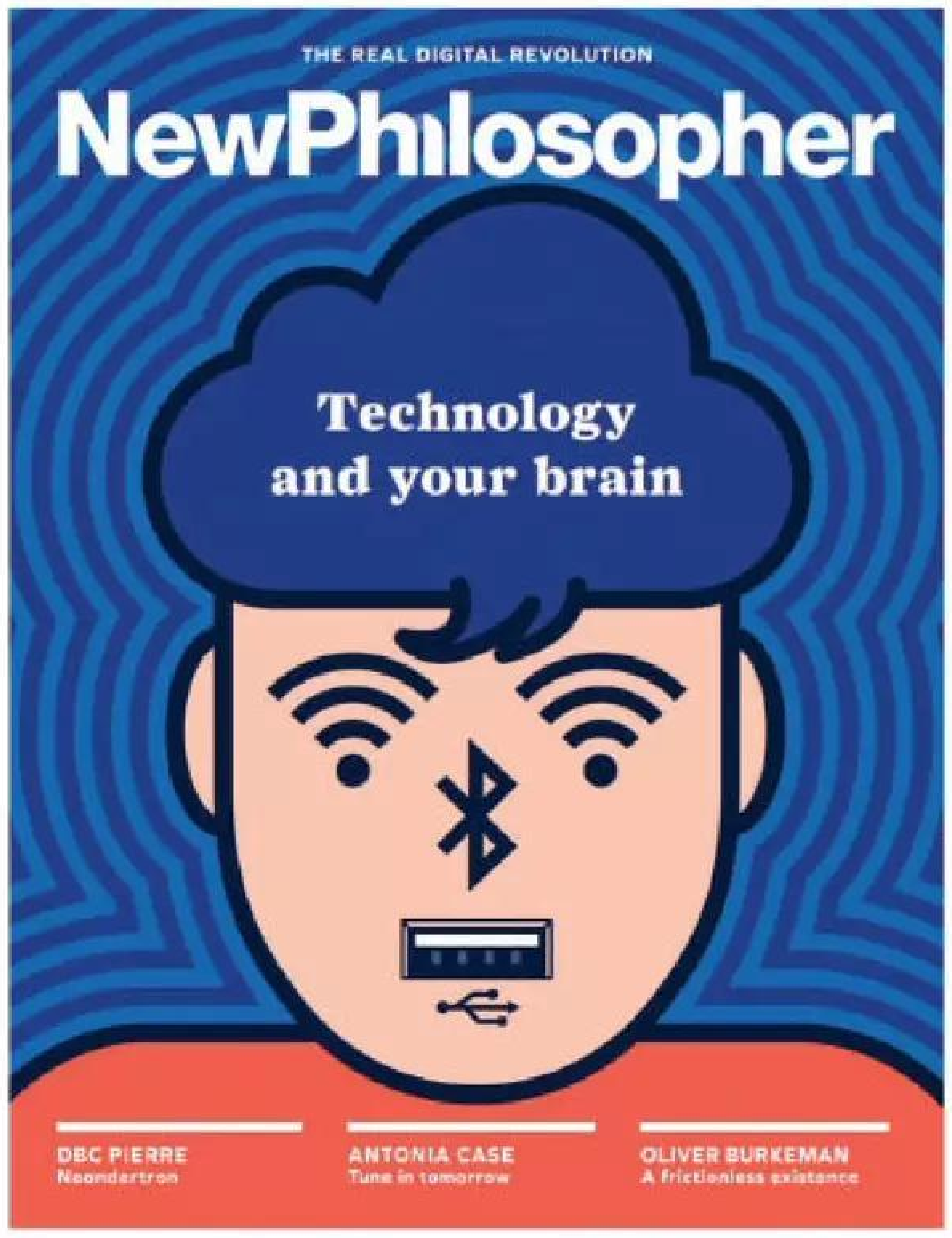
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ANTONIA CASE
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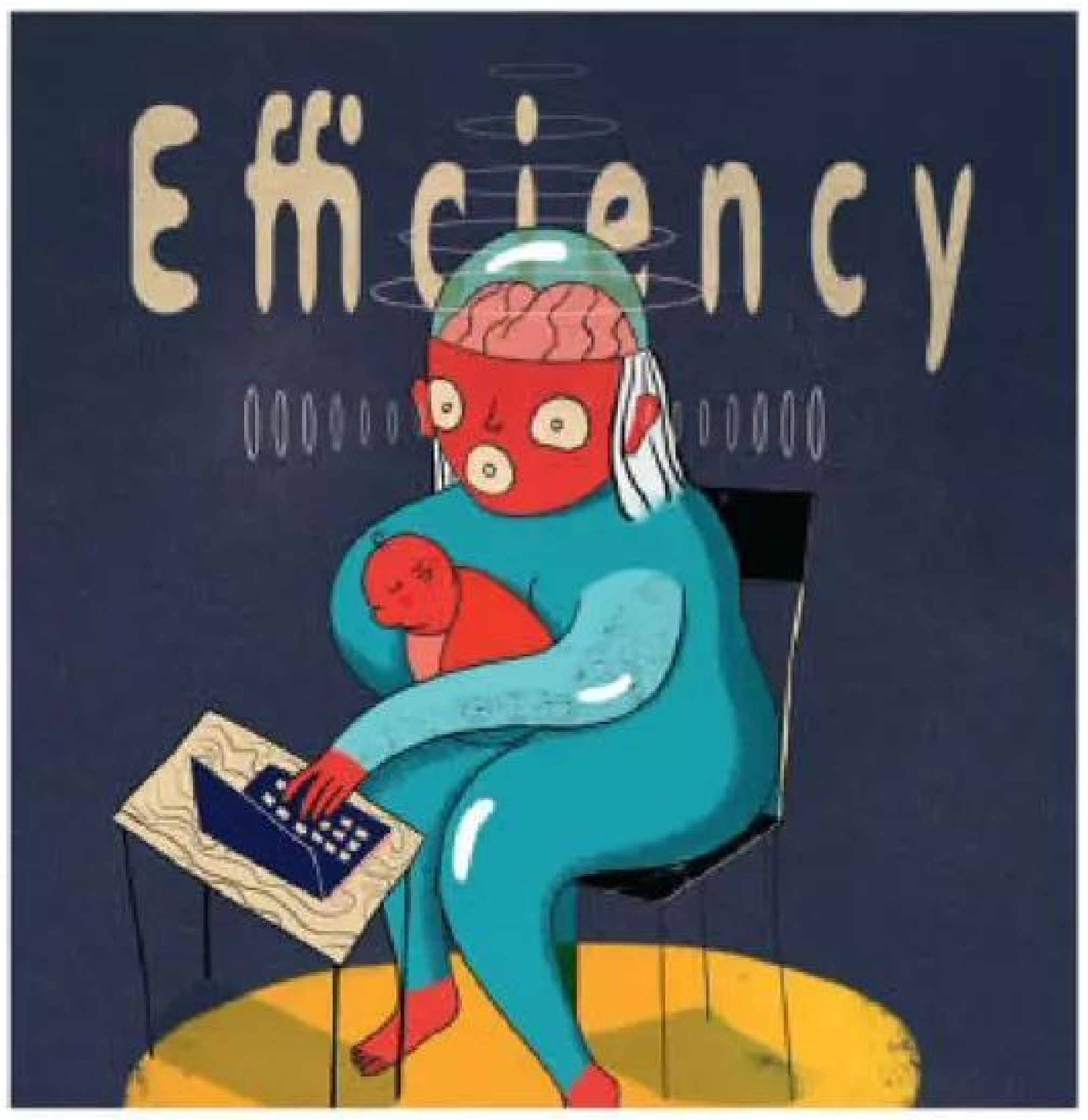
CONTENTS

3 Editor's letter
4 Contents
6 Online contents
8 Contributors
10 Ellis ~ Peter Strain
12 News from nowhere
20 A frictionless existence ~ Oliver Burkeman
23 Tech stats
26 Tune in tomorrow ~ Antonia Case
30 Philosophy tech support ~ Existential Comics
32 The Tower of Babel ~ Du Zhen Jun
38 Skinner ~ Peter Strain
40 Forgetting how to forget ~ Patrick Stokes
44 Living philosophy
48 Neandertron ~ DBC Pierre
54 The end of the world ~ André Dao
58 Ethical dilemmas ~ Matthew Beard
60 Can technology save us? ~ Damon Young
64 Caught in the net ~ Jessa Gamble
66 Technology defined
68 Interview ~ Luciano Floridi
74 Tech quotes
76 The art of Amistics ~ Tom Chatfield
82 Six philosophers
84 The real digital revolution ~ Robert McChesney
90 Discarded objects ~ Nigel Warburton
94 Interview ~ Andrew Feenberg
98 Living in a simulation ~ Russell Blackford
102 The second coming ~ W.B. Yeats
104 Wittgenstein's jet ~ David Edmonds
108 Writers' award winner ~ Angela Smith
111 Writers' award runner-up ~ Sheila Pham
116 Our library
118 The machine stops ~ E.M. Forster
122 Documentaries
123 Around the web
124 What's on
126 Subscribe
128 The thought police ~ André Dao
130 13 questions ~ Tim Soutphommasane

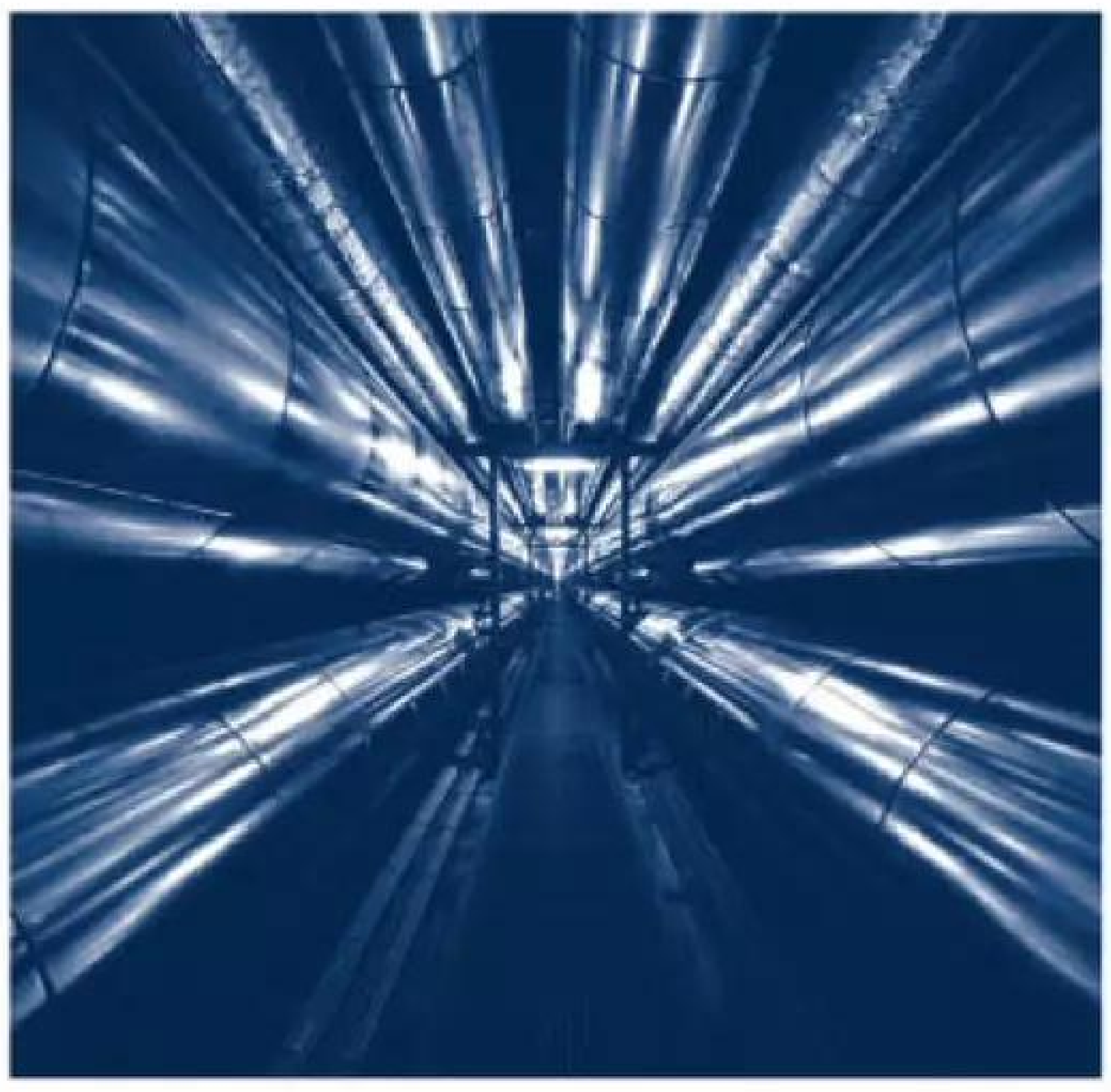
20. EFFICIENCY
A frictionless existence
Oliver Burkeman

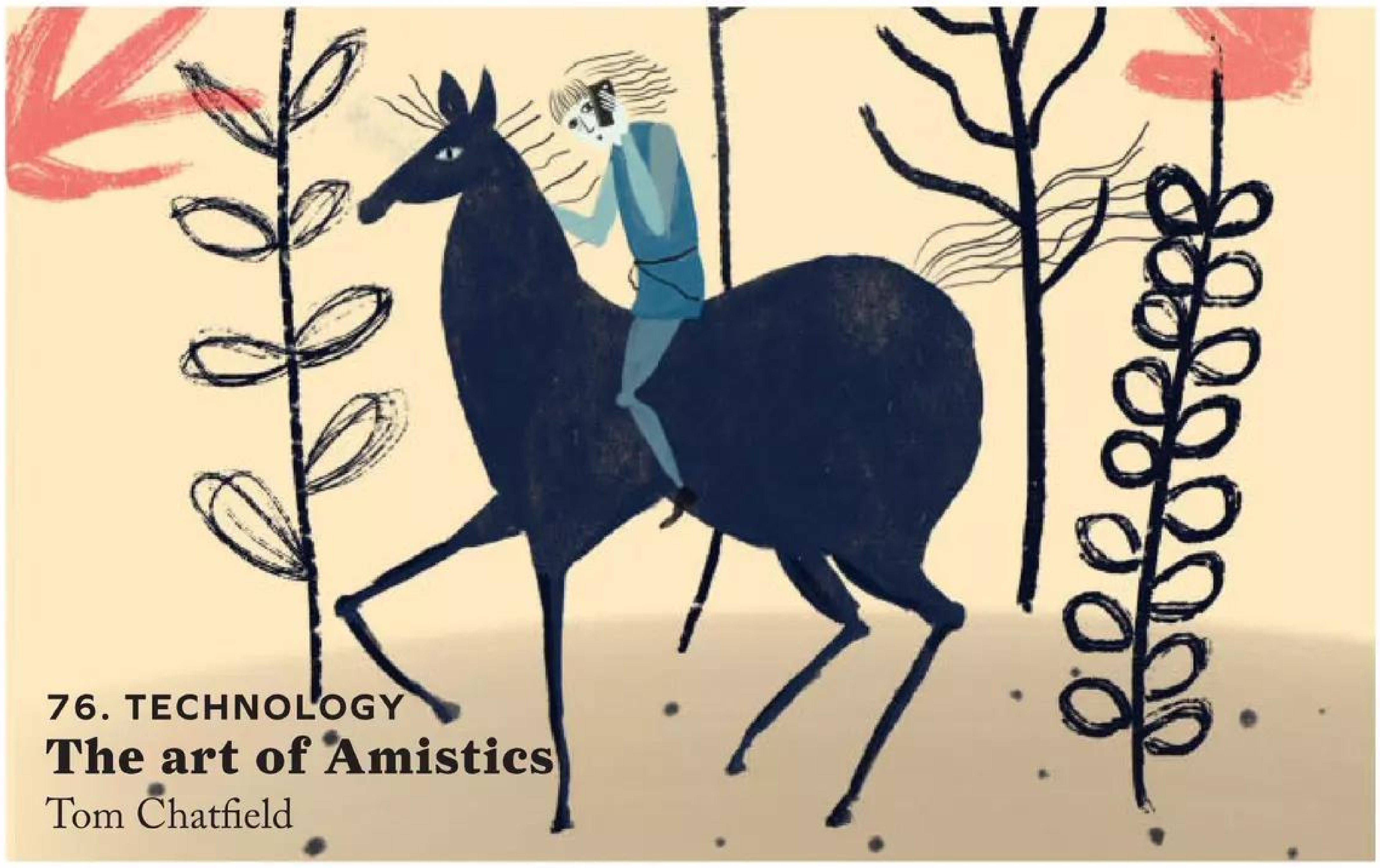

Efficiency

68. INTERVIEW
Floridi's revolution
Zan Boag

48. PROGRESS
Neandertron
DBC Pierre

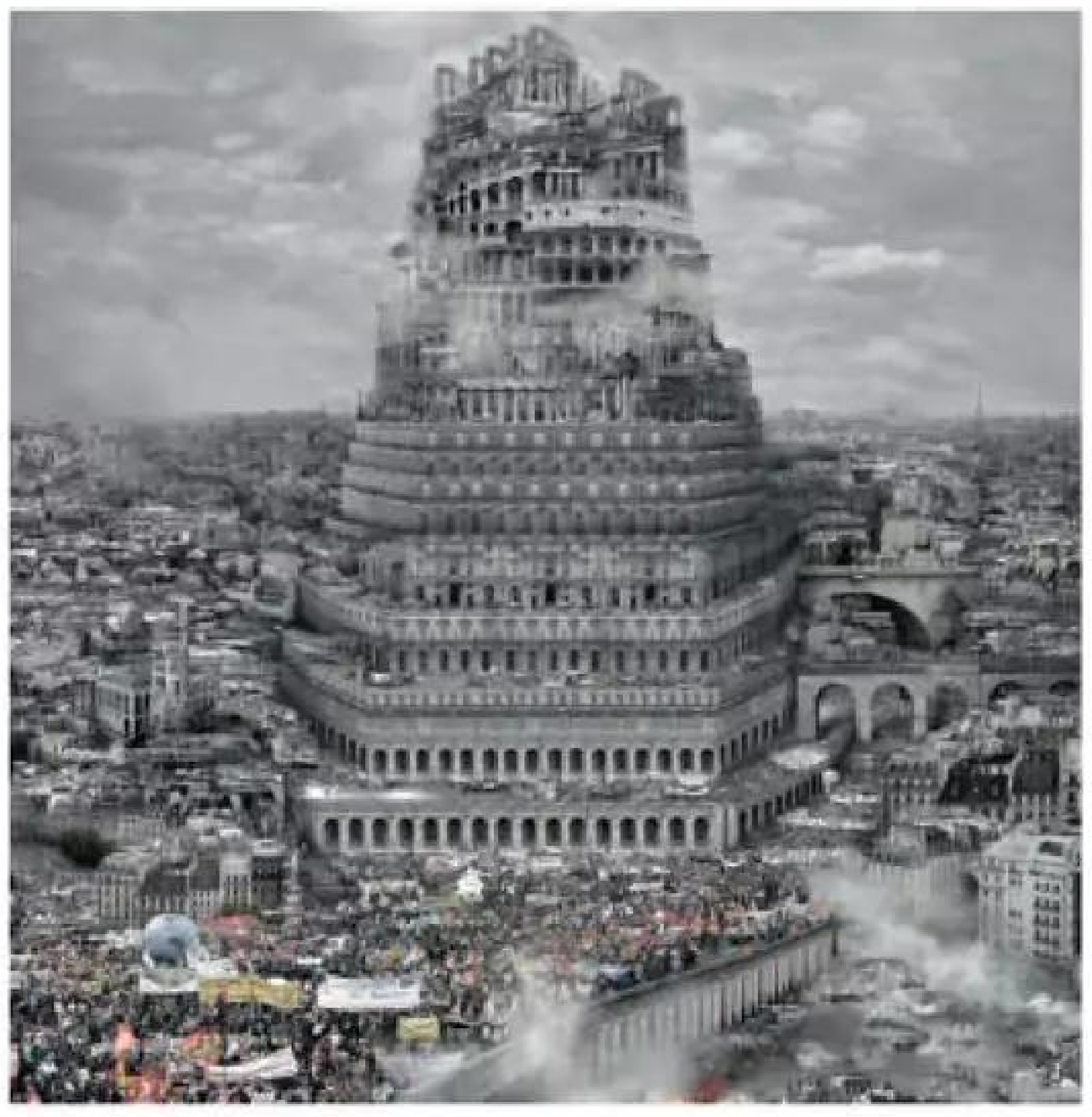
118. THE FUTURE
The machine stops
E.M. Forster





76. TECHNOLOGY
The art of Amistics
Tom Chatfield

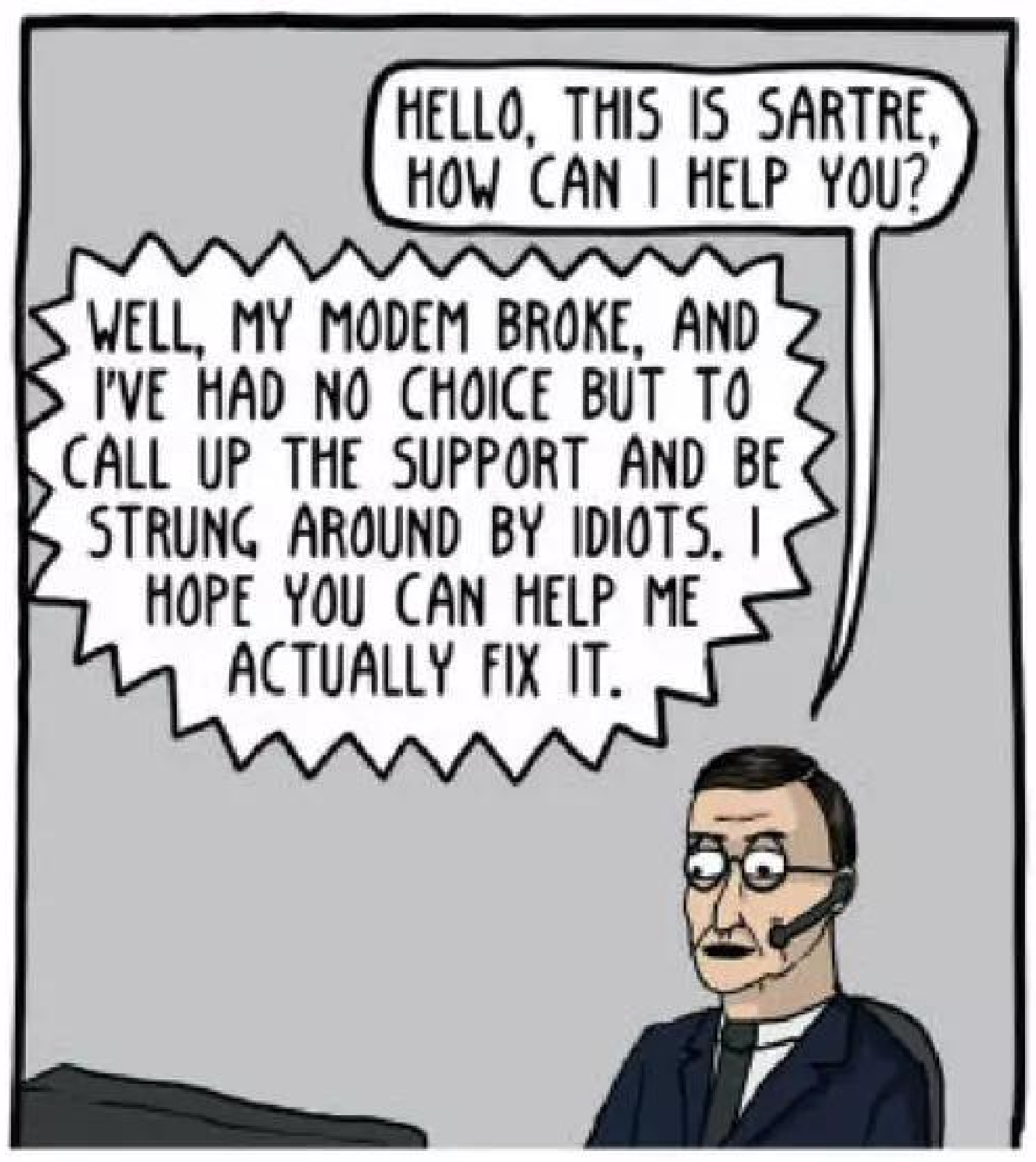
32. ARTIST
The Tower of Babel
Du Zhen Jun



26. TELEVISION
Tune in tomorrow
Antonia Case

EVERYTHING IS TRUE!

30. EXISTENTIAL COMICS
Tech support
Corey Mohler


HELLO, THIS IS SARTRE, HOW CAN I HELP YOU?
WELL, MY MODEM BROKE, AND I'VE HAD NO CHOICE BUT TO CALL UP THE SUPPORT AND BE STRUNG AROUND BY IDIOTS. I HOPE YOU CAN HELP ME ACTUALLY FIX IT.

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THE PRICE OF IMMORTALITY

Byron did little to quell the many rumours of his scandalous affairs, understanding as he did the nature of his fame.

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Over a certain wealth level, you know it's not very useful for society if you keep it forever. So you should return part of it each year.

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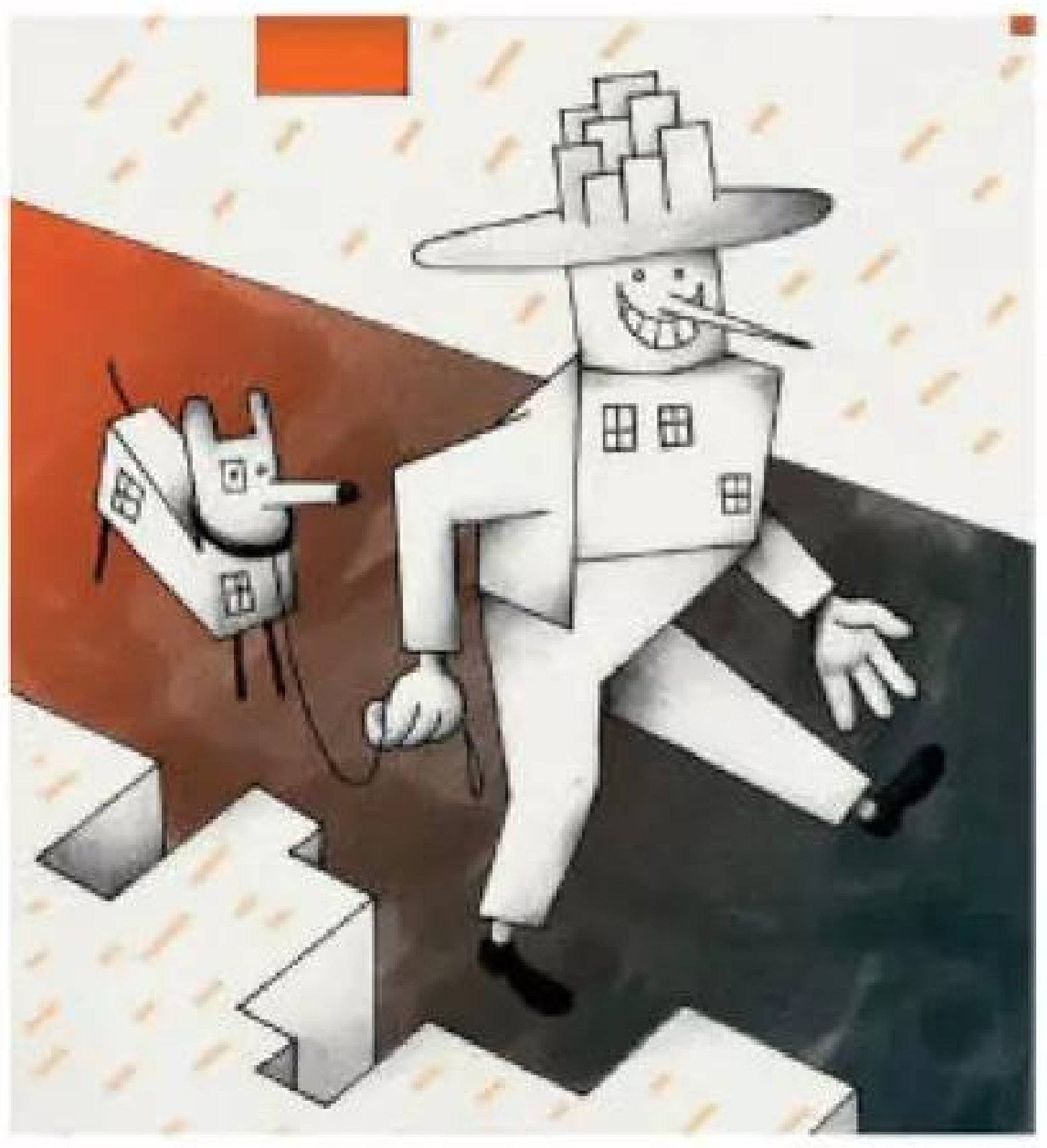

THE HOUSING GAME

Magie called her precursor to *Monopoly* a "practical demonstration of the present system of land-grabbing with all its usual outcomes and consequences."

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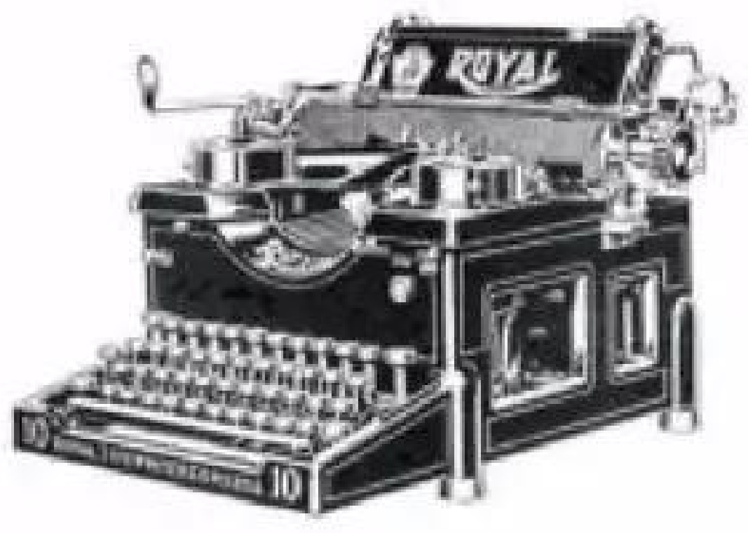

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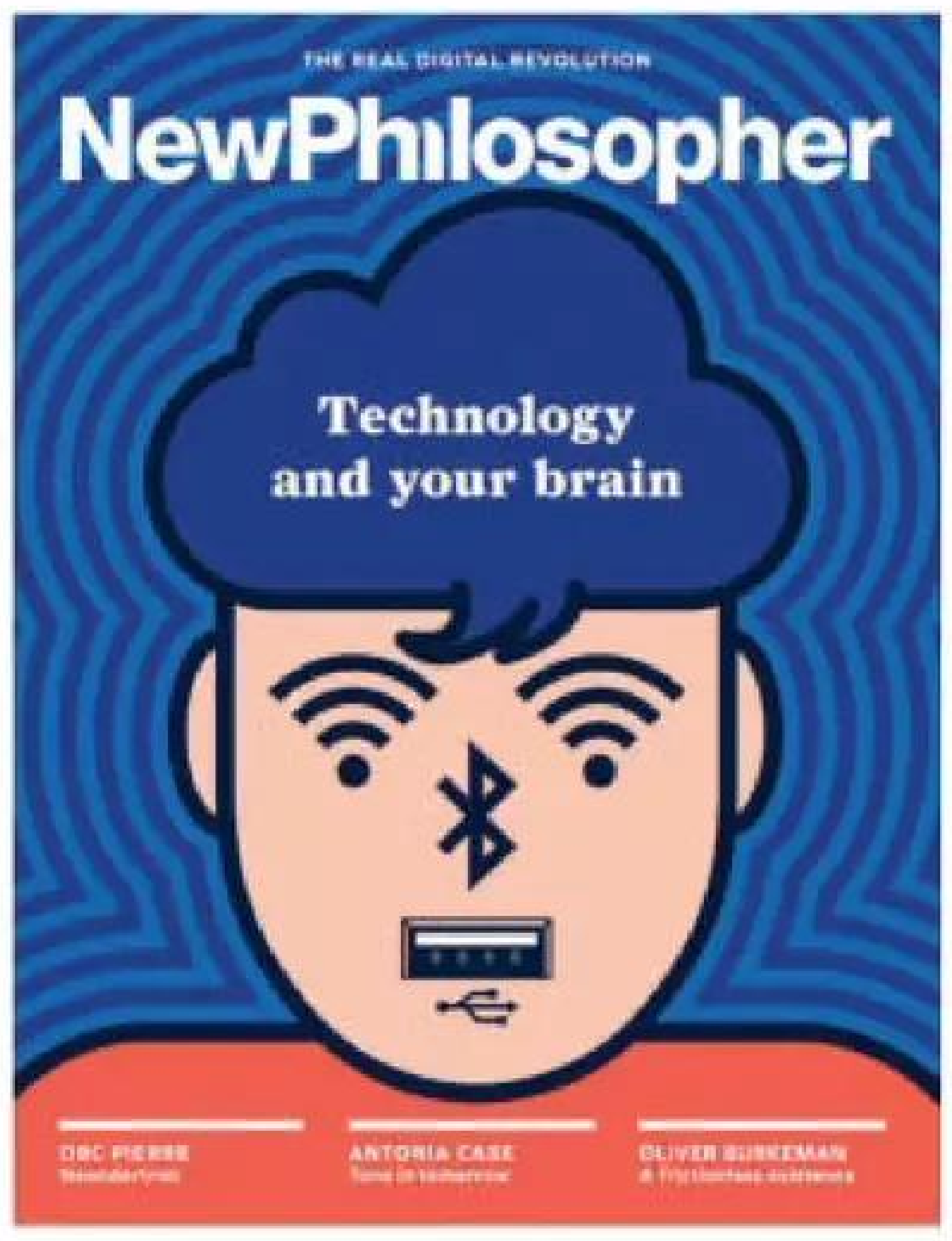

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> THE GREATEST TASK BEFORE CIVILISATION AT PRESENT IS TO MAKE MACHINES WHAT They OUGHT To BE, THE SLAVES, INSTEAD OF THE MASTERS OF MEN

Havelock Ellis

Artwork by Peter Strain

Havelock Ellis

ERGENCIA
SALIDA D

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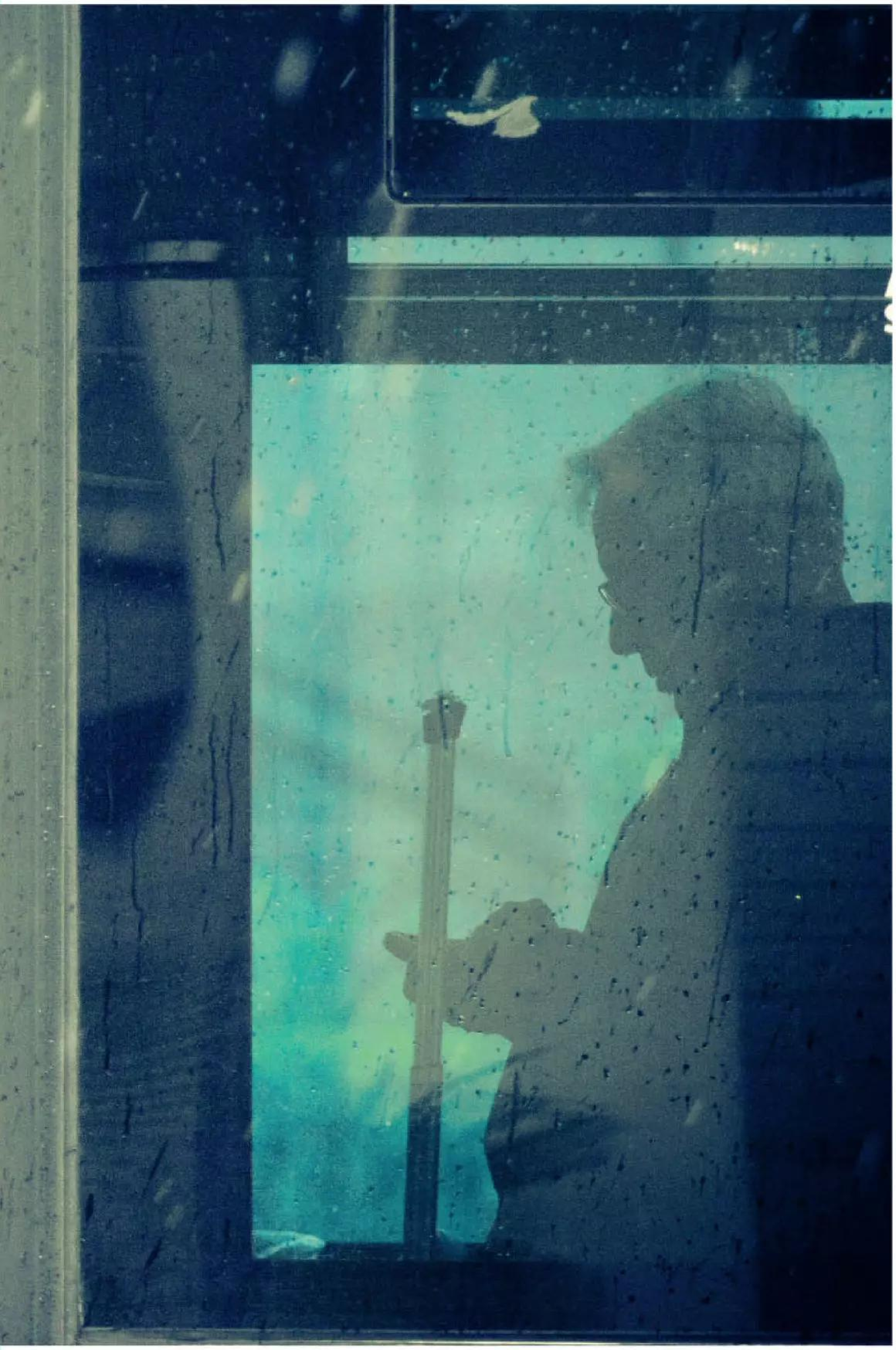


On project

One day, sitting at his desk at home, American physicist Alan Lightman had the horrifying realisation that he no longer wasted time. From the instant he opened his eyes in the morning until he turned out the light at night, he was 'on project' – working on his laptop, answering letters, checking telephone messages – his day subdivided into smaller and smaller units of efficient time. "I hardly ever give my mind permission to take a recess, go outside, and play," he writes in his book *The World is Too Much With Me*. "What have I become?" he asks. "A robot? A cog in a wheel? A unit of efficiency myself?"

High-speed communication technologies have undeniably sped up the pace of life. Now that we *can* do almost everything at lightning speed using some form of technology or another, we choose to do so – rarely questioning the underlying meaning behind the many and random tasks we accomplish each day. As long as we're ticking off our to-do lists, we're making progress, right?

But Lightman, a professor of humanities at MIT, questions: "What have I personally lost when I no longer permit myself to 'waste' time? When I never let my mind spin freely, without friction from projects or deadlines, when I never let my mind think about what it wants to think about, when I never sever myself from the rush and the heave of the external world – what have I lost?"

Lightman suspects that without silence, space, and time for reflection, the inner self – the part of us that imagines, dreams, explores, and questions – is dulled, tuned out. Lightman concludes: "I believe that I have lost something of my inner self."

Only to be a success

There are many people in today's society who have consulted a psychologist over a lack of success. "I have so much potential. I just want to make a success out of my life."

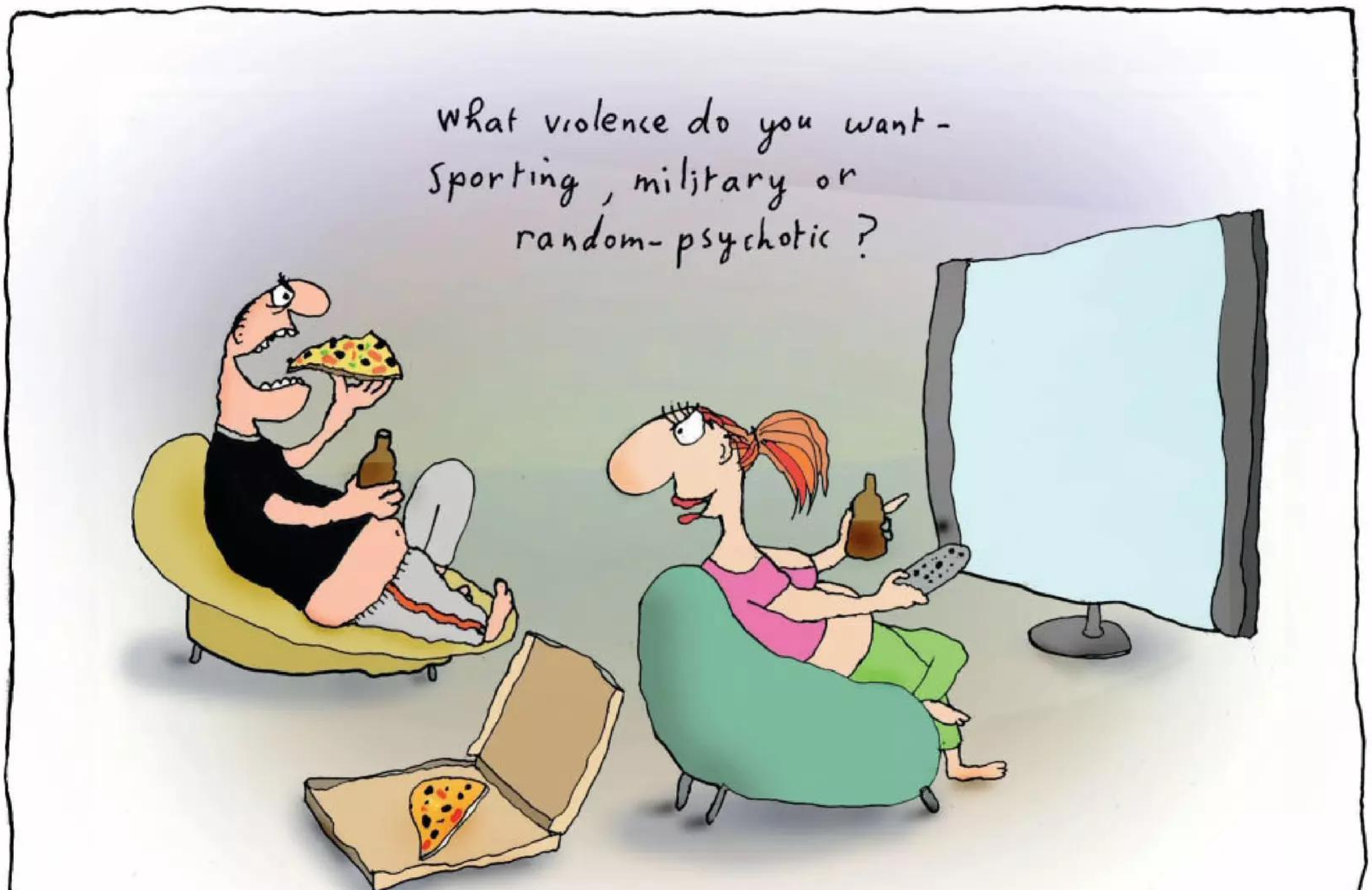
For some reason or another, these people can't find their own path to success; they keep hitting barriers; nothing ever goes their way. The media, too, dedicates serious space to the importance of success in everyday life. "Why extremely successful people swear by this 5-minute daily habit." "Do successful CEOs sleep less?"

Today being 'successful' takes centre stage; in the Middle Ages, the word didn't even exist. Success in the 16th century meant "to follow or succeed something"; in other words, something happens if I do this. To distinguish oneself as 'successful', and therefore superior to others, was simply not possible, writes Erich Fromm. "Today, we have the feeling that 'success' must be one of the oldest words in the history of mankind." But in previous times, to say someone was 'successful' was as nonsensical as calling them 'purple'.

"Concepts such as 'success', which appear to us to be natural in our language, are purely sociologically conditioned concepts that exist just as infrequently in many other societies as the concept 'exploitation'," writes Fromm. The word 'successful' is a key term for describing humans in our competitive, individualistic culture as it keeps people striving, bettering, competing, and working – activities that are necessary for the social structure to survive and prosper. Indeed, 'success' metrics are good for the economy but not so good for the human soul.

In the midst of increasing mechanisation and technological organisation, propaganda is simply the means used to prevent these things from being felt as too oppressive and to persuade man to submit with good grace.

Jacques Ellul


What violence do you want - Sporting, military or random-psychotic ?
Leunig

Inventing our own demise

If the advent of nuclear weapons taught us anything, it is that the tide of new technology is almost impossible for us to resist. If it can be imagined, then we are sure to pursue it, no matter the risks to ourselves or to others – if only to ensure that some rival doesn't get there first.

Artificial intelligence appears to be one such inevitability. And while the gold standard for AI pioneers has long been the invention of a machine capable of mimicking human intelligence, a far more powerful – and potentially dangerous – concept is already being predicted: superintelligence. A superintelligence is any intellect – whether that be a digital computer, a network of computers, or something else entirely – that vastly outperforms the best human brains in practically every field. In that sense, it would be more than a mere tool – it would be an autonomous agent, capable of creativity and research. Indeed, it may be humanity's last invention, as a superintelligence would be able to invent its own, new technologies far superior to our own capacity for invention.

Swedish thinker Nick Bostrom says the potential benefits of a superintelligence are immense, going as far as to say that "it is hard to think of any problem that a superintelligence could not either solve or at least help us solve." A superintelligence, he says, would be capable of eliminating disease, poverty, environmental destruction, and unnecessary suffering of all kinds.

For Bostrom, a superintelligence would be better at moral decision-making. "To the extent that ethics is a cognitive pursuit," writes Bostrom, "a superintelligence could also easily surpass humans in the quality of its moral thinking." In other words, where ethical questions have correct answers arrived at by reasoning and the weighing of evidence, then a superintelligence would perform the task better than humans.

In that respect, we would be able to delegate political decisions – for example, about the proper allocation of resources – to a superintelligence, which would be able to devote unprecedented intellectual resources towards weighing up the consequences of different options. It would be so clever that it would be able to determine the true intention of our questions, solving as yet unarticulated and unconceptualised problems.

But it is precisely this extraordinary adaptability that makes a superintelligence so dangerous. In fact, for all of Bostrom's optimism about its potential benefits, the dangers are such that he also considers the advent of a superintelligence an "existential risk" – that is, a risk to our continued existence as a species. The reason for that is actually quite simple: more than any other human invention, a superintelligence would resist any and all human efforts to control it. Bostrom argues that in this scenario, its initial motivations would be absolutely crucial. By definition, a superintelligence would be able to outmanoeuvre the brightest human minds and thwart any attempt to prevent it from implementing its ultimate goal – whether that goal is increased human happiness or the enrichment of the superintelligence's inventor.

For this reason, Bostrum suggests that the top goal of a superintelligence should be "friendliness". Even then, the way we define friendliness for a superintelligence would be crucial. Wrongly calibrated, a friendly superintelligence might decide to protect us from any and all harm – including the harm that might come from our free and informed choices. If, as Bostrom and other philosophers believe, the invention of a superintelligence is only a matter of time, then it will be more important than ever to understand – and agree upon – what we mean by concepts such as 'human happiness'.

Think like a mountain

We're often told to put ourselves in someone else's shoes. This is an ethical injunction – by imagining life from the perspective of another person, we are according them and their needs a measure of respect. In Kant's formulation, it means that we never treat other human beings as a means to an end, but always as an end in themselves. The question of who should be included in this sphere of equality has vexed thinkers throughout the ages: could (and should) they imagine themselves as slaves, or women, or elephants?

Philosophies such as abolitionism, feminism, and animal rights have worked to expand the horizons of our ethical thinking; most of us have little problem imagining other human beings as our fellows, and increasingly we are willing to extend our compassion to non-human animals. But what of plant life? Or, as the American ecologist Aldo Leopold put it: can you think like a mountain?

In his 1949 book *Sand County Almanac*, Leopold outlined his "land ethic", which held that "a thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise." In other words, to think like a mountain is to recognise the needs of not just ourselves or our fellow humans, but those of the natural world around us.

The Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess took up Leopold's idea and incorporated it into his own, more fully formed concept of "deep ecology". A keen mountaineer, Naess discovered during a visit to the Himalayas that Sherpa culture held certain mountains to be sacred, and Sherpas would consequently not venture on to them. Deep ecology became an extension of this mountain reverence to nature as a whole.

Contrasted with "shallow ecology" – characterised as movements preoccupied with the health and affluence of wealthy people in developed countries, such as the fight against pollution and resource depletion – Naess' deep ecology instead respects the intrinsic value of living things, seeking to recognise a sort of "biospheric egalitarianism". Influenced in part by 17th century philosopher Benedictus Spinoza, Naess says that we cannot separate our individual selves from the rest of the world. We are instead knots in the biospheric net; rather than privileging our own needs, or the needs of our species, we must look after the "ecological self" – the larger community of all living things.

> **Everywhere we remain unfree and chained to technology, whether we passionately affirm or deny it. But we are delivered over to it in the worst possible way when we regard it as something neutral; for this conception of it, to which today we particularly like to do homage, makes us utterly blind to the essence of technology.**
>
> **Martin Heidegger**

A world without work

We weren't supposed to be working this much. Back in 1930, economist John Maynard Keynes predicted in his essay *Economic Possibilities for our Grandchildren* that within a century, automation would virtually eliminate the need for work. We might put in a 15-hour working week for the sake of old habits, but the vast majority of our time would be devoted to leisure.

In some ways, Keynes was right on the money: recent reports by economic analysts suggest that up to 35 per cent of jobs in the UK are threatened by automation. In the US, that figure is 47 per cent. And these aren't just the manual labour jobs that have gradually been superseded by industrialisation. Thanks to advances in machine learning and robotics, everything – from law to medicine to financial services – is up for grabs.

But unlike Keynes' rosy picture of work-free abundance, contemporary economists are far from convinced that the rise of robotics will lead to greater human happiness. In fact, most commentators predict rising inequality as a tiny elite – those who own the robots – increase their share of wealth while the rest compete against each other for the few remaining jobs.

As the German political writer Paul Mattick put it, "the leisure of the starving, or the needy, is no leisure at all but a relentless activity aimed at staying alive or improving their situation". Which is why Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams advocate a Universal Basic Income (UBI) in their recent book, *Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a World Without Work*. The UBI guarantees an adequate income, is provided without means-testing, and supplements rather than replaces the welfare state. For Srnicek and Williams, this is the only way to ensure that a world without work is more utopia than dystopia.

To value a split-focus life augmented by the machine is above all to squeeze out potential time and space for reflection.

Maggie Jackson

Illustration by Genís Carreras

Unplugged for 24 hours

Nearly 1,000 university students across ten countries volunteered for *24 Hours: Unplugged* – a study on the effects of abstaining from media for one day. Banned from their usual fix of smartphones, tablets, television, radio, DVDs, game consoles, news, music, and social media, students were forced to experience the 'unmediated' world for a day, removing the filter of the media machine. Incapable of navigating, hooking up with friends, checking the time, organising their day, or even sensing the physical device in their hands, students complained of anxiety, confusion, distress, social isolation, and excruciating boredom. Some students compared 'being unplugged' to being in solitary confinement.

"I felt so lonely – as if I was in a small cage on an island," complained a student from China. "I felt as though I was 'lost' in a void," a Lebanese student said. "It was a very unusual and uneasy feeling."

The study, conducted by the International Center for Media and Public Agenda (ICMPA), highlights the difficulties of withdrawing completely from the ubiquitous soundtrack of the media. "Never before [have I] noticed that my own life is full of media shadow," commented a China-based student.

A clear majority of students in every country failed to complete 24 hours unplugged. "For people in modern society," said a student at Chongqing University, "communication [media] is as important as breath." A British student compared unplugging their ethernet to turning off a life-support system. Another said it was just like being "tortured".

Given the amount of time spent using more than one medium at a time, today's youth pack a total of 10 hours and 45 minutes worth of media content into each and every day.

Source: Kaiser Family Foundation

Set adrift in the wilds of unmediated civilisation, a panic-stricken Hong Kong student yelped: "I am a person with a great need of security." With an increased heart rate and heightened anxiety, some students feared for family and friends. Feelings of boredom were rife. Minutes unplugged stretched out to what felt like hours at a time – students fidgeted, itched, and craved the distractions, the connection, even just the physical touch of the gadgets themselves.

Media has become an extension of these students, ICMPA reported – integral to their personal identity. Going without media was like losing a part of themselves. Media, for many of these students, shaped what others thought of them and how they perceived themselves. Who were they if they weren't plugged in?

A Ugandan student, alarmingly, equated *the experience of real life* to being lost in "another world". A US student likened it to being "homeless" – an outcast, set adrift, "as if my real life and my virtual life were co-existing in different planes, but in equal time."

Given fluid intelligence peaks in early adulthood before gradually declining, what should we make of a generation of media-junkies who are doing little more than playing with gadgets during their prime intellectual years?

"At half past seven I decide it's time for drastic action to get through the last eleven and a half hours," a British student recalls. "I decide that it's time to turn to alcohol. Within two hours of drinking with my flatmates I am heroically intoxicated and singing, although I'm told it's more like shouting. I drag myself to my bedroom, and just sit there no longer singing, just swaying – staring at the blank face of my television, wondering if it would really be so bad to turn it on, just put in a DVD. Surely if the DVD is made before 1998 it doesn't count as media? I resist, partly owing to true British determination, mainly owing to the fact that in my state I wouldn't be able to navigate the DVD into its tray. So I spend the last few hours in a deep alcohol-induced slumber, dreaming of seeing the green light blinking to life on my game console and hearing the whirr of my laptop starting up."

Today, 24 per cent of American teens are online "almost constantly", facilitated by handheld mobile devices.

Source: Pew Research Center

American teens are often engaging in two, three, or more media simultaneously.

Source: Kaiser Family Foundation

A typical 8- to 18-year-old lives in a home containing four TV sets, two CD/tape players, three radios, three VCR/DVD players, two video game consoles, and two computers. The amount of time teenagers spend consuming media each day, at 7.38 hours (or 52 hours a week), is more than three times the amount of time spent with their parents (2.17 hours); it dwarfs the time spent on hobbies (1 hour a day) or doing physical exercise (1.25 hours); and trounces homework (50 minutes). They spend more time with media than doing any other activity besides (maybe) sleeping.

Source: Kaiser Family Foundation

CHINA (Mainland & Hong Kong):

"I was anxious, irritable and felt insecure."
"I feel like a slave to media."
"I sat in my bed and stared blankly. I had nothing to do."

USA:

"I went into absolute panic mode."
"I felt like a drug addict."
"My anxiety took over me and I caved in."

ARGENTINA:

"I felt 'dead'."
"I felt like I was missing something."
"I felt the helplessness of not communicating."

SLOVAKIA

"I was totally desperate."
"I panicked."
"I felt a strong feeling of anguish."

MEXICO:

"I began to feel distress and despair."
"I felt incomplete."
"Emptiness overwhelmed me."

UK:

"I am an addict."
"My senses went numb and I felt paralysed."
"Media is my drug. Without it I was lost."

UGANDA:

"I felt like there was a problem with me."
"I am so dependently tied to various forms of media."

LEBANON:

"My dependance on the media is absolutely sickening."
"I am [an] addict."
"I didn't realise it would be so isolating."

CHILE:

"I felt desperate and felt some kind of anguish."
"My nerves were overwhelmed."
"I felt lonely."

Efficiency

A frictionless existence

by Oliver Burkeman

If you want to make a killing in the modern tech economy (or so I'm told; sadly, I'm not speaking from experience here) the trick is to find a 'pain point', then eliminate it. Pain points, in Silicon Valley jargon, are the everyday annoyances that waste time and energy thanks to the 'friction' – another favourite term – they add to our lives. One hugely successful example of eliminating a pain point is the multi-billion-dollar success story that is the enemy of established taxi drivers everywhere: the pain arises from having to look up the number of a local taxi service, or head out onto the street in uncertain hopes of flagging one down. Another case in point is a leading contactless payment system that allows you to spend money by waving your smartphone at an in-store sensor – because it's 'painful', or so we're told, to have to reach into your bag, fish out your wallet, and find a credit card or cash. Do you find it painful to wait for mail-order books to arrive, or to schlep to the bookstore? Make a one-click purchase on your e-reader. Pain, the technology world insists, pervades our lives, whether we know it or not. "We don't even realise something is broken," observes startup investor Alexis Ohanian, "until someone else shows us a better way."

Only a fool, you might think, would object to a life with less pain. Yet on closer inspection there's something troubling about this promise of a frictionless life. Shopping in a bricks-and-mortar bookstore isn't an intrinsically painful undertaking, after all: in the right circumstances, it can be positively pleasurable. And personally I find that being forced to pause for a moment before spending, as I locate my money, is highly beneficial: it slightly increases the chances I'll resist a pointless purchase. Living frictionlessly often really just means living thoughtlessly. There are apps that will automatically wish your friends a happy birthday, so you never need think warm thoughts of them again. Or take the advertising campaigns in the US for a food delivery service (another business built on eliminating pain points) which makes a point of boasting that you can order your cheeseburger, or your chow mein, without ever interacting with a human being. The ads are tongue in cheek, but the implication is real enough: talking to other people, other than family and friends, is a burdensome chore, and best eliminated where possible.

I know, I know: I sound like a curmudgeon. But this is no mere Luddite objection to change. Philosophers and social theorists at least since Max Weber have recognised that, in the technological pursuit of efficiency, we risk losing something significant. That's because 'efficiency', which sounds like a neutral matter of achieving your existing goals more rapidly, has a tendency to distort the goals themselves. In the late 19th century, clipboard-wielding consultants descended on western workplaces as part of the fad for 'scientific management', looking for inefficiencies to eliminate. But efficiency, in many cases, soon became more prized than whatever the workplace in question had originally been established to achieve. "Time keeping passed into time-saving and time-accounting and time-rationing," wrote Lewis Mumford – and "as this took place, Eternity gradually ceased to serve as the measure and focus of human action." Efficiency, in short, is never neutral. It is always defined in relation to some desired outcome – and these days, in the absence of any countervailing force, you can be confident that outcome will usually be the financial health of a corporation. Is a contactless payment system efficient? As a means of preserving my savings, it's appalling. As a means of transferring them swiftly to other people's coffers, you can't beat it.

Yet efficiency isn't only a problem when it serves to facilitate profiteering by others. We can just as easily cause trouble for ourselves. Probably, like me, in the midst of an over-busy life, you've been seduced into experimenting with one or more of the countless apps that promise to enhance your productivity, by prioritising your inbox, reshuffling your to-do list, pinging you with task reminders, and so on. And perhaps you've discovered that they come with a dismaying side effect. At the same time as speeding the completion of minor tasks, they push those minor tasks to centre stage, until completing as many of them as possible – 'getting things done', regardless of whether they're the things that really count – becomes an end in itself. Work begins to feel like running on a hamster wheel: no less busy than before, but rather less meaningful, and perpetually focused on some hypothetical future moment at which you'll have 'cleared the decks'. Which you'll never do, because there's effectively an infinite amount of potential work – and not even the best efficiency improvement can get you to the end of an infinite journey.

Nor is it only work that succumbs to the ethos of tech-driven efficiency. In an era of activity trackers and sleep-monitoring apps and gloopy food alternatives designed to cut down on cooking and eating time, rest and restoration are just as susceptible to its soul-corroding effects. "Mechanisation," as Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer wrote presciently in 1972, despite neither man owning an activity tracker, "has such a power over man's leisure and happiness… that his experiences are inevitably after-images of the work process itself. What happens at work, in the factory or in the office, can only be escaped by approximation to it in one's leisure time."

Indeed, it might not be going too far to propose, in precise opposition to the cult of efficiency, that the most fulfilling aspects of life are by definition inefficient, or at least non-efficient. Love, friendship, immersion in nature, spiritual practice: a person who proudly declared themselves to have achieved a high level of efficiency in any of these domains would surely be guilty of a mistake. (And you'd be dismayed, wouldn't you, to be principally described as an efficient friend, parent, or lover?) These activities are ends in themselves; to attempt to undertake them with efficiency in mind is to drain them of their primary value.

The implicit promise of efficiency-enhancing technologies is that they'll speed our progress toward a future time when the chores are all handled, and we can really start to live. But that time never comes. Instead, one day, you could find yourself living the perfectly tech-smoothed life: alone at home, eating takeout food you obtained without speaking to anyone else, watching streaming movies to avoid the 'pain' of meeting friends at the cinema… and wondering when exactly it was, in your frictionless existence, that the point of being alive slid entirely out of view. N

You'd be dismayed, wouldn't you, to be principally described as an efficient friend, parent, or lover?

The new technology of writing first appeared on clay tablets 5,000 years ago.

92% of US teens aged 13 to 17 go online daily.

Western nations dump 50,000 tonnes of e-rubbish in India each year.

A period of great change, the 19th century saw the invention of the electric light, the stethoscope, and the sewing machine.

The Digesting Duck, a duck 'robot' that appeared to eat and defecate, was created by Jacques de Vaucanson in 1739. Voltaire wrote that "without… the duck of Vaucanson, you would have nothing to remind you of the glory of France."

In 2011 the World Heath Organisation stated that mobile phones were "possibly carcinogenic".

The death of books? More than 300,000 new titles were released in 2010 and in the US alone 750,000,000 books were sold.

The US stockmarket technology index, the NASDAQ, rose 400 per cent to 5,000 points in the five years to March 2000, before more than halving to less than 2,000 points by March 2001.

More than 40% of physicians go online during a patient visit, most often using a handheld device.

The average American adult spends 11 hours per day, or 70% of waking hours, with electronic media – this includes, computers, smartphones, television, videos, games, and the radio.

SALADS
Fruit salad
FRUIT JUICES
Caffè Speciale

Iced Coffee
Golosina
Cappuccino Specials
Please pay

W

Photo: "Love (of technology)", by Matthew G

EVERYTHING
IS TRUE!
7
8
5

Tune in tomorrow

by Antonia Case

I remember some time ago standing outside a video shop and watching a mother with her twin daughters inside. The woman was chatting to the video shop owner while her daughters, drifting aimlessly behind her back, had turned to face a television set elevated on a wall. A flat screen projected a common Hollywood scene of two men fighting to the death.

I mentally conjured up a re-enactment of this same scene, but this time in real life. So we have a mother quietly comparing DVD options while behind her two grown men punch, kick, headbutt, and bash each other.

Now had this happened in real life, we could fairly well predict a mother's reaction to finding her treasured children inside this house of horror: she would desperately whisk them away to safety. Perhaps later, she'd ask them to relate back the experience just to ensure they weren't experiencing some form of post traumatic stress. No mother wants her nine-year-old daughters to carry around *that* sort of experience for life.

Blinds closed, lights off, easy chairs pulled close to the box, I often think about the billions plonked in front of their television sets (or more recently computer screens) at night. Others trot off to public viewing houses, like the cinema, to get their fare of sex, murders, mutilation and whatnot. But, what has frequently stumped me is this: were these exact events enacted in real life these very same folk would voice all manner of complaints – "voyeuristic," "sordid", and "violent". They'd priggishly turn their gaze away from the sex scenes; they'd gasp at the massacres and cruelty, clutching their pearls in indignation. But when the scene is on a screen, these people classify their viewing experience as "informative", "entertaining", even "art".

The general consensus seems to be that events played out on a screen are somehow different to those we witness in real life. For starters, in real life you can act upon something you witness. If there's an attempted murder outside your home then you could, and probably should, do something about it. When two men fight each other to the death in a video shop, then your duty of care as parent is to get your children out of harm's way.

In 1919, psychoanalyst Dr Viktor Tausk wrote *On the Origin of the 'Influencing Machine' in Schizophrenia*, in which he details the experience of a number of his schizophrenic patients. Tausk's schizophrenic patients were convinced that their problems were caused by an "influencing machine", or "small black box" that was capable of imprinting flat images into their brain. According to the patients, the "influencing machine" could produce thoughts and feelings as well as removing their own internally-generated ones. The difficulty for schizophrenic patients was separating feelings, thoughts and sensations that were personally created, as opposed to those beamed into them by "the machine". (Of course, their 'box' was a figment of their imagination; 99 per cent of households today are relieved of the burden of such creativity.)

Personal memories are the wellspring of creativity, personality, individuality, and character. Our memories, thoughts, and feelings are what make us *us*. I vividly remember slow rain-filled days in primary school, hundreds of children huddled under tin shelters as the rain descended. The pungent smell of damp woollen jumpers and fermenting lunches still lingers in the cells of my brain, easily recalled – a personal memory of my childhood linking me to the person I've become. Today, on rainy days, lazy teachers place children face flat in front of black boxes to watch a DVD. Instead of pondering the rain, children gaze at images on a screen, the likes of fire-breathing dragons and dancing penguins. The children are entertained; they don't fight it, barely moving, zombie-like, and teachers get a moment of respite from the day's push and shove. But how do children know how to separate their own thoughts from the images imprinted on their brains by the machine?

One thing's for sure: we know that the physical body cannot tell the difference. Want to create a champion sportsperson? Then teach her to visualise. Get her to conjure up a successful performance; get her to run through the routine, step by step, in her mind. Get her to visualise her best.

In a 1976 article in *Psychology Today,* Dr Richard Suinn, describes the method by which he mentally prepared skiers for the Olympics. "I instructed the skiers to practise their athletic skills by using mental imagery," he wrote. "Jean-Caude Killy, a three-gold-medal skier, reported that his only preparation for one race was to ski it mentally. He was recovering from an injury at the time and couldn't practise on the slopes. Kelly says the race turned out to be one of his best."

"During one experiment," Suinn continues, "I recorded the electromyography responses of an Alpine skier racer as he summoned up a moment-by-moment imagery of a downhill race... Muscle bursts appeared as the skier 'hit jumps'... His EMG recordings almost mirrored the course itself." Research shows that images held in the mind produce physiological responses. In other words, our nervous system responds to the images we carry in our heads.

Until the late 1920s, most images in our heads were our own. Books, indeed, transport us in imagination to different times and places – but the image conjured up and retained in the brain from reading text is owned and controlled by us. We are the directors of the 'film' in our mind even though we may not be its narrator.

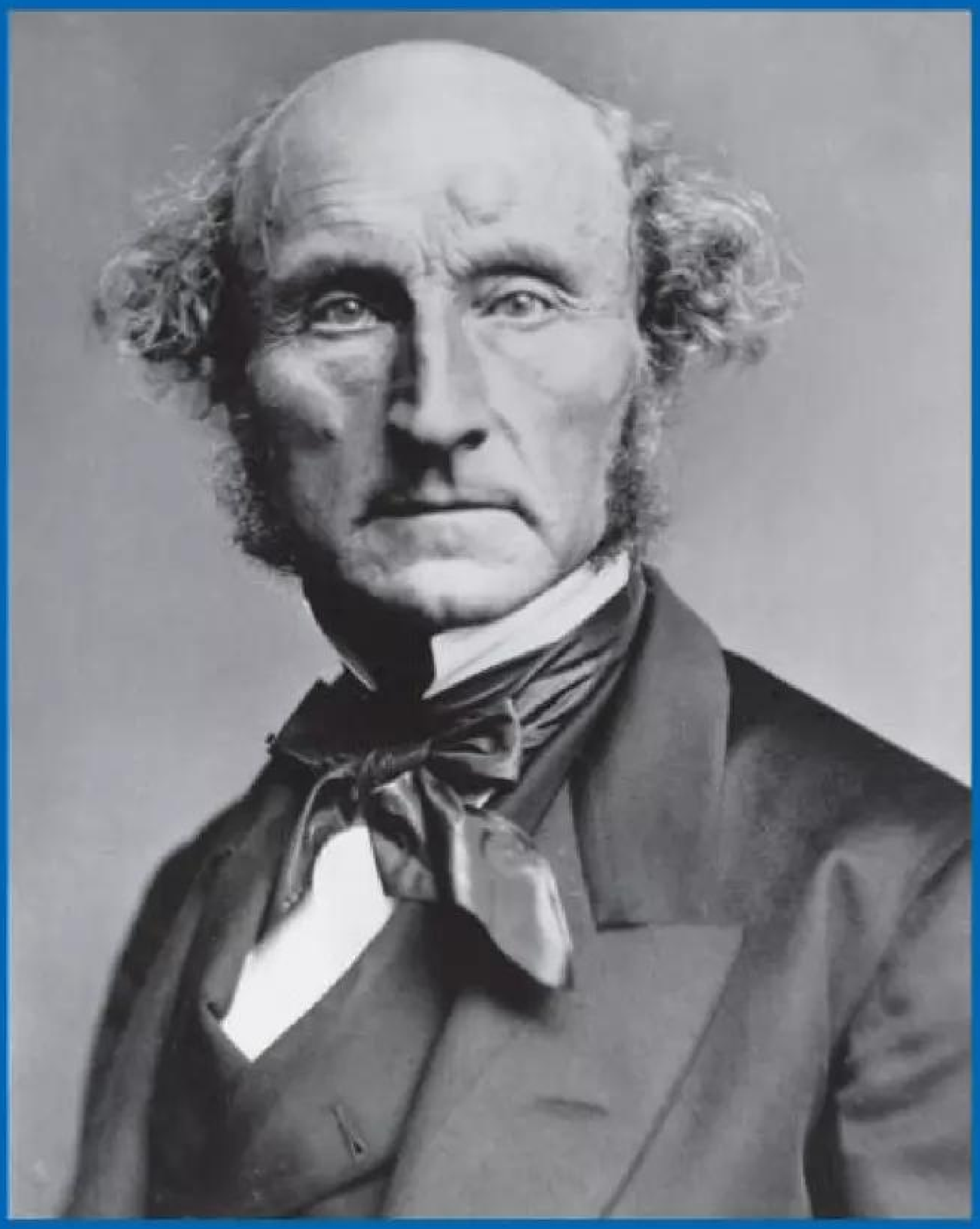
Research shows that images held in the mind produce physiological responses. In other words, our nervous system responds to the images we carry in our heads.

In the 1930s colour photographs appeared on the scene, however the quality was poor and the technology wasn't widely available. After the Second World War there was a shift. Powerful image-generators were locked down in homes, manufacturing, second by second, a vast array of images, repetitively, vividly, and seductively for its burgeoning audience. Thanks to television, humans began to carry machine-generated imagery as well as their own internally-produced images around in their heads. And, as we all know, once inside the mind, artificial images – just like the real ones we experience in our lives – remain there for good. Can you wipe the image of a famous person from your mind, or the nightly newsreader, or the main character from a recent movie you watched?

Of course, the mother at that video outlet mightn't have cared less what her children watched. Indeed, as she probably figured, her children will live to see much, much worse. As flourishing adults, her two daughters will witness on 'the box' multiple wars and natural disasters, car and plane crashes, terrorist attacks, rape, kidnapping, assault, and abuse. And over time, the numbness will begin to settle in, washing over them like dust. The sensitive, artistic types may suffer the worst of it – concentration difficulties, hyper-vigilance, irritability, nightmares, and flashbacks – and everyone, to some degree, will experience a loss of interest in the small moments in life.

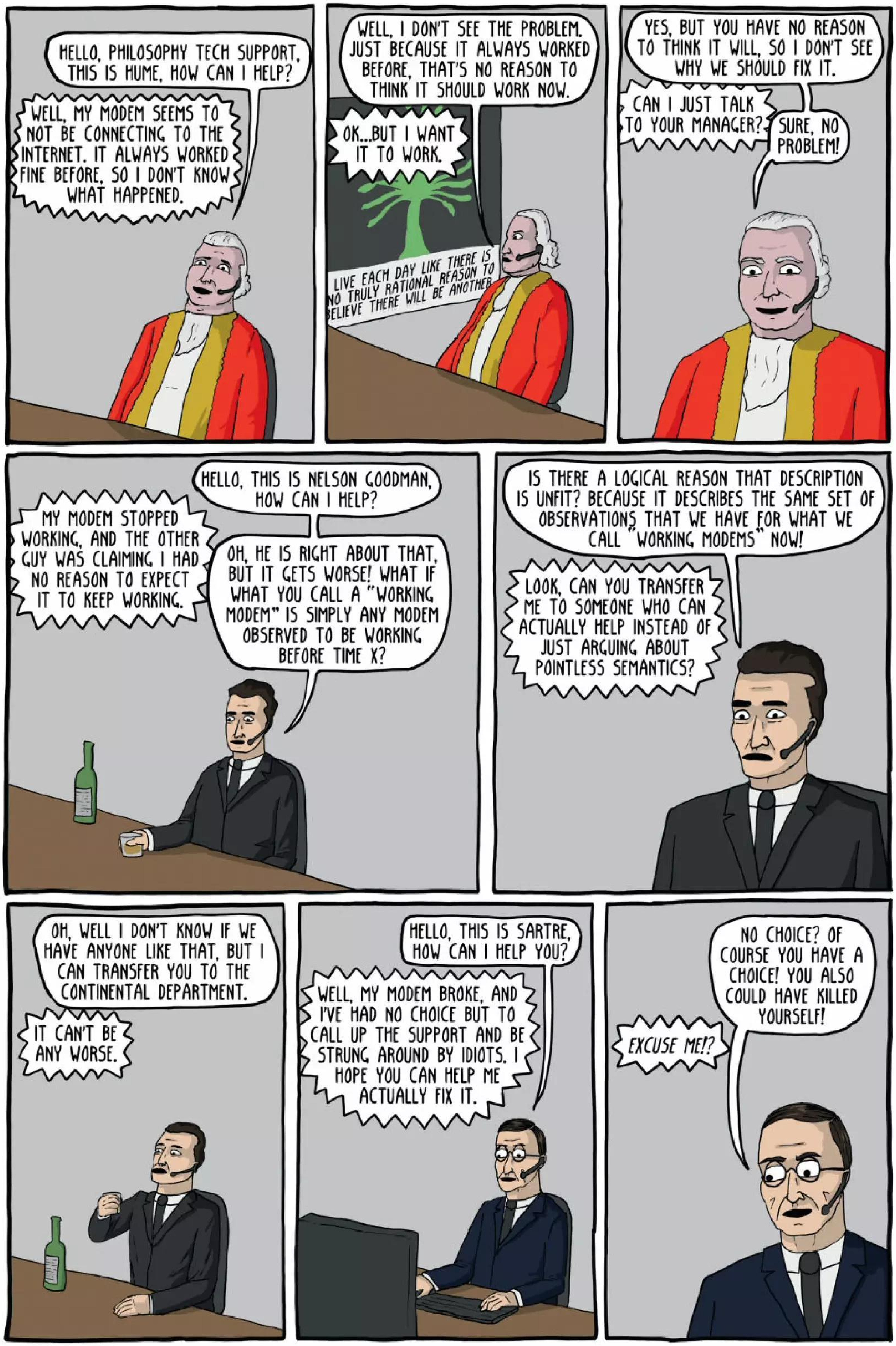
Back in 1978, author Jerry Mander wrote a polemical book called *Four Arguments For the Elimination of Television*. Mander writes: "When you are watching TV, you are experiencing mental images… these mental images are not yours. They are someone else's. Because the rest of your capabilities have been subdued, and the rest of the world dimmed, these images are likely to have an extraordinary degree of influence. Am I to say this is brainwashing or hypnosis or mind-zapping or something like this? Well, there is no question that someone is speaking into your mind and wants you to do something:

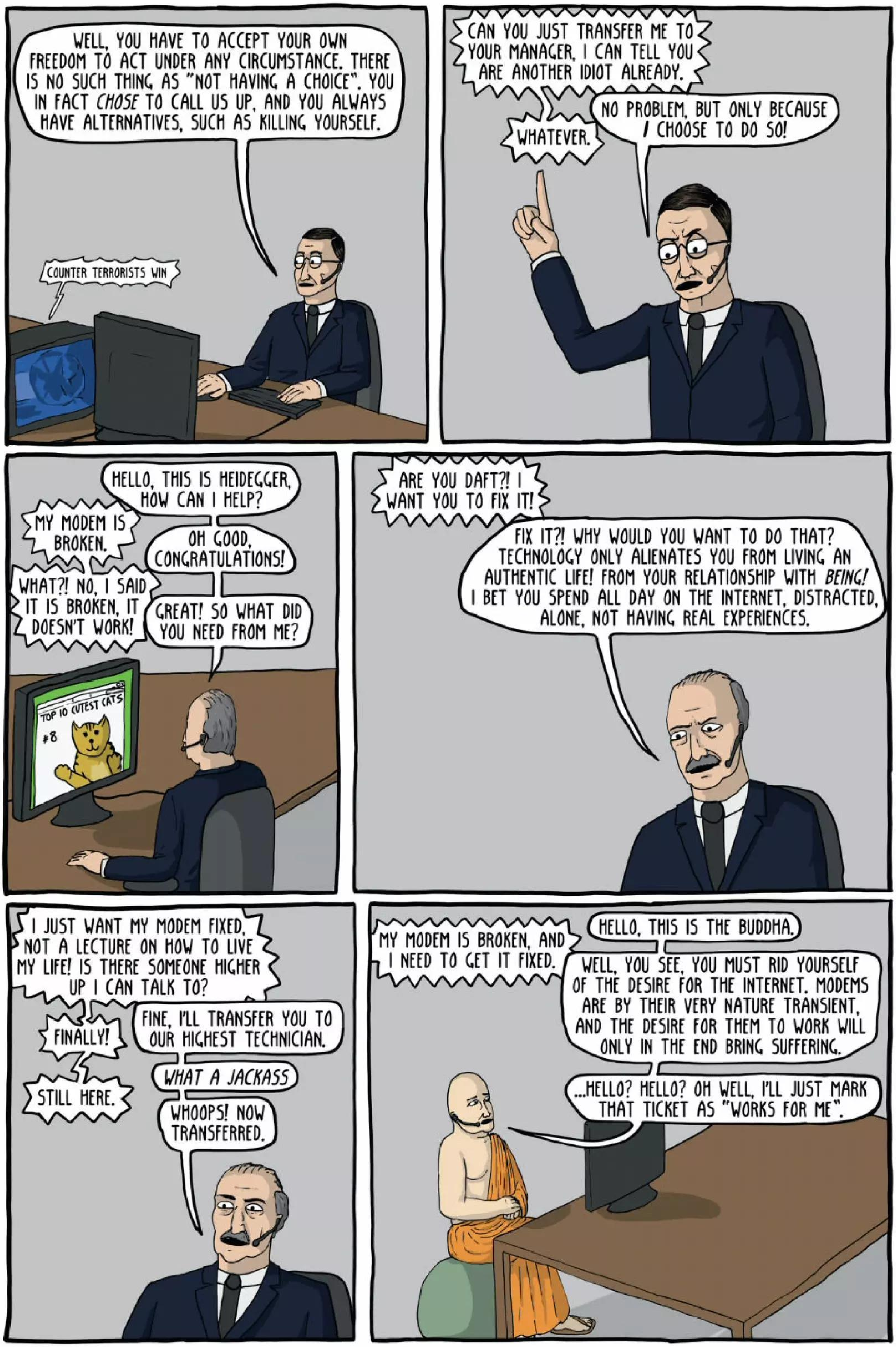
First, keep watching.
Second, carry the images around in your head.
Third, buy something.
Fourth, tune in tomorrow."



"Supposing it were possible to get houses built, corn grown, battles fought, causes tried, and even churches erected and prayers said, by machinery – by automatons in human form – it would be a considerable loss to exchange for these automatons even the men and women who at present inhabit the more civilised parts of the world, and who assuredly are but starved specimens of what nature can and will produce. Human nature is not a machine to be built after a model, and set to do exactly the work prescribed for it, but a tree, which requires to grow and develop itself on all sides, according to the tendency of the inward forces which make it a living thing."

John Stuart Mill


HELLO, PHILOSOPHY TECH SUPPORT, THIS IS HUME, HOW CAN I HELP?
WELL, MY MODEM SEEMS TO NOT BE CONNECTING TO THE INTERNET. IT ALWAYS WORKED FINE BEFORE, SO I DON'T KNOW WHAT HAPPENED.
WELL, I DON'T SEE THE PROBLEM. JUST BECAUSE IT ALWAYS WORKED BEFORE, THAT'S NO REASON TO THINK IT SHOULD WORK NOW.
OK...BUT I WANT IT TO WORK.
LIVE EACH DAY LIKE THERE IS NO TRULY RATIONAL REASON TO BELIEVE THERE WILL BE ANOTHER
YES, BUT YOU HAVE NO REASON TO THINK IT WILL, SO I DON'T SEE WHY WE SHOULD FIX IT.
CAN I JUST TALK TO YOUR MANAGER?
SURE, NO PROBLEM!
HELLO, THIS IS NELSON GOODMAN, HOW CAN I HELP?
MY MODEM STOPPED WORKING, AND THE OTHER GUY WAS CLAIMING I HAD NO REASON TO EXPECT IT TO KEEP WORKING.
OH, HE IS RIGHT ABOUT THAT, BUT IT GETS WORSE! WHAT IF WHAT YOU CALL A "WORKING MODEM" IS SIMPLY ANY MODEM OBSERVED TO BE WORKING BEFORE TIME X?
IS THERE A LOGICAL REASON THAT DESCRIPTION IS UNFIT? BECAUSE IT DESCRIBES THE SAME SET OF OBSERVATIONS THAT WE HAVE FOR WHAT WE CALL "WORKING MODEMS" NOW!
LOOK, CAN YOU TRANSFER ME TO SOMEONE WHO CAN ACTUALLY HELP INSTEAD OF JUST ARGUING ABOUT POINTLESS SEMANTICS?
OH, WELL I DON'T KNOW IF WE HAVE ANYONE LIKE THAT, BUT I CAN TRANSFER YOU TO THE CONTINENTAL DEPARTMENT.
IT CAN'T BE ANY WORSE.
HELLO, THIS IS SARTRE, HOW CAN I HELP YOU?
WELL, MY MODEM BROKE, AND I'VE HAD NO CHOICE BUT TO CALL UP THE SUPPORT AND BE STRUNG AROUND BY IDIOTS. I HOPE YOU CAN HELP ME ACTUALLY FIX IT.
NO CHOICE? OF COURSE YOU HAVE A CHOICE! YOU ALSO COULD HAVE KILLED YOURSELF!
EXCUSE ME!?


WELL, YOU HAVE TO ACCEPT YOUR OWN FREEDOM TO ACT UNDER ANY CIRCUMSTANCE. THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS "NOT HAVING A CHOICE". YOU IN FACT *CHOSE* TO CALL US UP, AND YOU ALWAYS HAVE ALTERNATIVES, SUCH AS KILLING YOURSELF.
COUNTER TERRORISTS WIN
CAN YOU JUST TRANSFER ME TO YOUR MANAGER, I CAN TELL YOU ARE ANOTHER IDIOT ALREADY.
WHATEVER.
NO PROBLEM, BUT ONLY BECAUSE *I* CHOOSE TO DO SO!
HELLO, THIS IS HEIDEGGER, HOW CAN I HELP?
MY MODEM IS BROKEN.
OH GOOD, CONGRATULATIONS!
WHAT?! NO, I SAID IT IS BROKEN, IT DOESN'T WORK!
GREAT! SO WHAT DID YOU NEED FROM ME?
TOP 10 CUTEST CATS
#8
ARE YOU DAFT?! I WANT YOU TO FIX IT!
FIX IT?! WHY WOULD YOU WANT TO DO THAT? TECHNOLOGY ONLY ALIENATES YOU FROM LIVING AN AUTHENTIC LIFE! FROM YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH *BEING!* I BET YOU SPEND ALL DAY ON THE INTERNET, DISTRACTED, ALONE, NOT HAVING REAL EXPERIENCES.
I JUST WANT MY MODEM FIXED, NOT A LECTURE ON HOW TO LIVE MY LIFE! IS THERE SOMEONE HIGHER UP I CAN TALK TO?
FINALLY!
FINE, I'LL TRANSFER YOU TO OUR HIGHEST TECHNICIAN.
STILL HERE.
WHAT A JACKASS
WHOOPS! NOW TRANSFERRED.
MY MODEM IS BROKEN, AND I NEED TO GET IT FIXED.
HELLO, THIS IS THE BUDDHA.
WELL, YOU SEE, YOU MUST RID YOURSELF OF THE DESIRE FOR THE INTERNET. MODEMS ARE BY THEIR VERY NATURE TRANSIENT, AND THE DESIRE FOR THEM TO WORK WILL ONLY IN THE END BRING SUFFERING.
...HELLO? HELLO? OH WELL, I'LL JUST MARK THAT TICKET AS "WORKS FOR ME".

Author/illustrator: **Corey Mohler,** Existential Comics. For more comics visit **existentialcomics.com**

Philosophy tech support

Pollution, **by Du Zhen Jun**

Photographs: Du Zhen Jun
Interview & translation Fr/En: Zan Boag

Tower of Babel

Classically-trained Chinese artist Du Zhen Jun's first photographic series 'Tower of Babel' reflects a contemporary apocalyptic world where humanity faces a disaster it has brought upon itself.

What ideas were you trying to convey with your photographic project 'Tower of Babel'?

The *Tower of Babel* project began in 2008 with the creation of six photos representing a new country that existed solely via an Internet connection. It is the reflection of my imagination fed by information available on the web. The first photo in the series is called *Independence Day*: the day of the inauguration of the President. I placed myself in the foreground just at the bottom of the tower. As the creator, I take on the role of sovereign – quite a difficult position. Each photo corresponds with a particular event that takes place in a megapolis, at the foot of a unique and extraordinary tower, pieced together from a collection of digital photos.

The confusion of languages in the tale of the Tower of Babel and the myth of the scattering of frightened people sets up a striking and dramatic visual artwork that I reimagine in the form of contemporary civilisation. My series is centred around the theme of digital – and therefore universal – language. I produced other photographs in 2011 situated more around the base of the tower, where humans take centre stage – acting out their lives in the foreground.

What effect is technology having on contemporary society?

It is a world without borders, without passports, where everything is possible. It is an empire of every man for himself, where each individual wages a permanent battle on this globalised scene – in which it is essential to tread very carefully so as to avoid putting oneself or others in danger.

This series displays a chaotic world – would you say that your outlook is largely positive or negative?

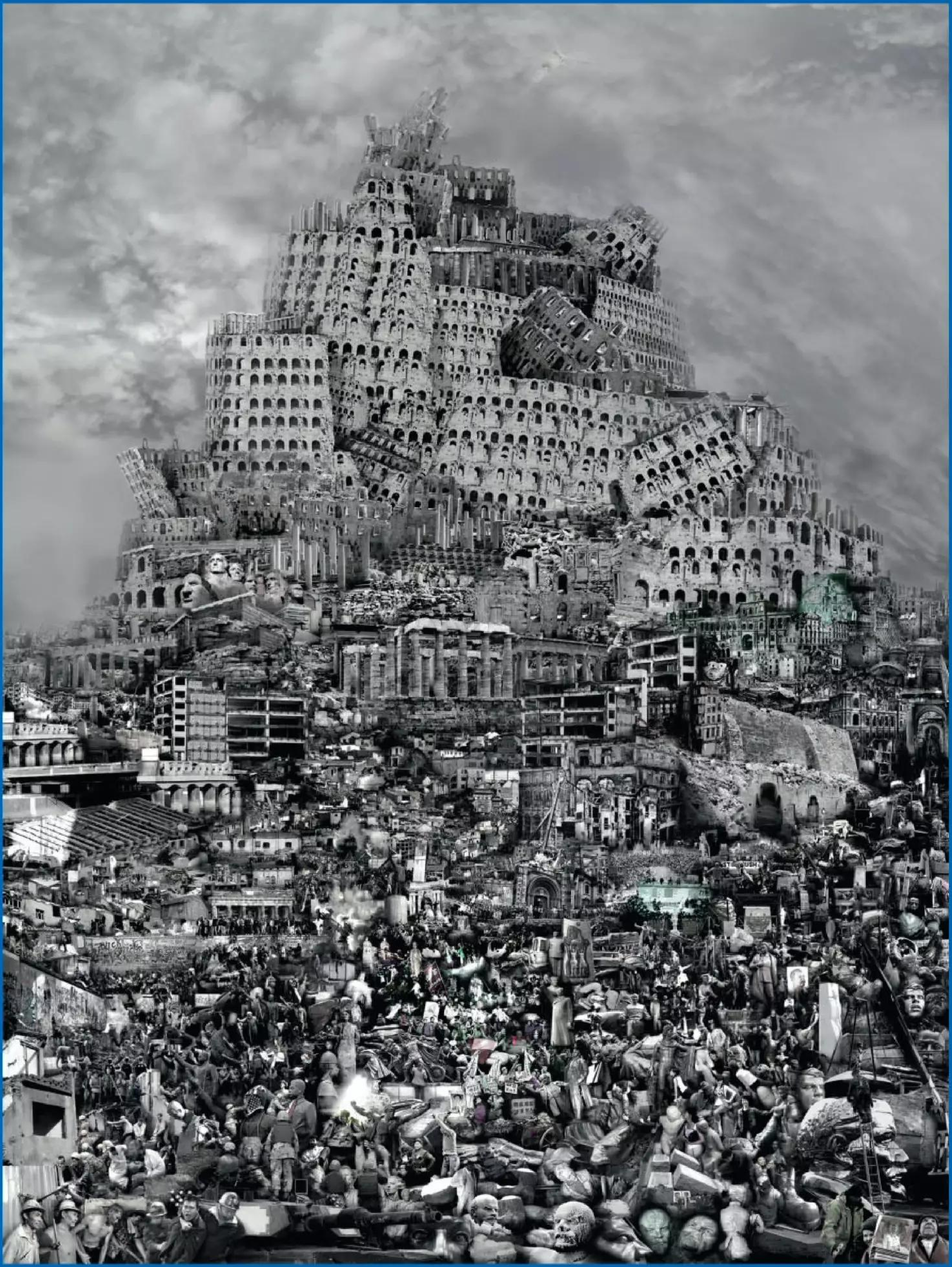
For Taoists, emotions are the root cause of both our joys and our sufferings – emotions are present in all parts and patterns of our lives. Negative emotions are the source of our positive emotions. In the end, it is humans who produce these emotions and it is up to them to transform them.

Where do you think humanity is heading?

In my series I show clearly the vanity of humans, but that doesn't mean I don't believe in human beings. Society changes profoundly and rapidly these days. We're at a turning point. We must go beyond ourselves, to find solutions to problems such as those we face with the environment today.

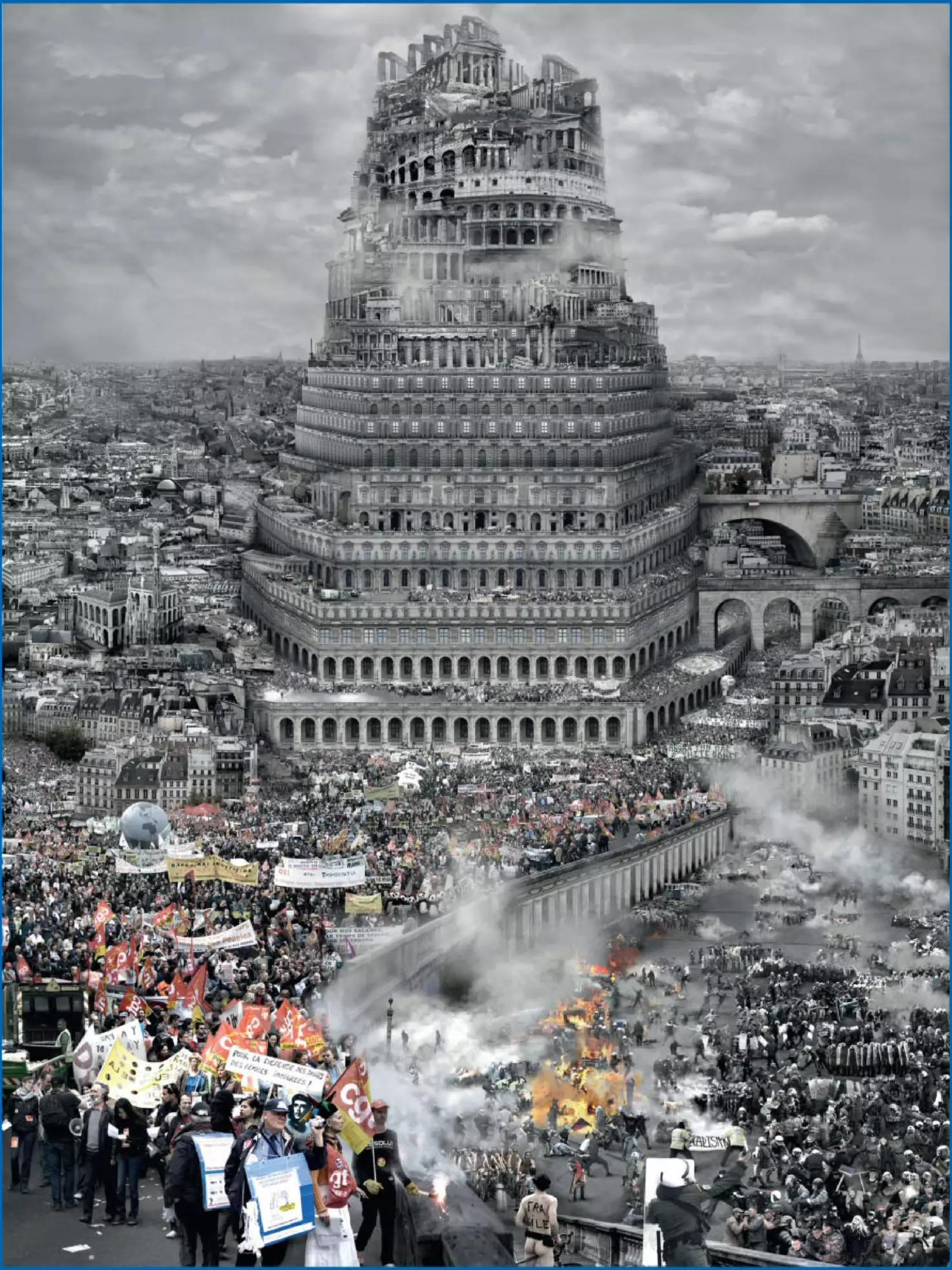
When it comes to technology, what is the most significant issue we face as humans?

Due to technology, in the future people will have lives that are relatively similar to one another, no matter where they live in the world. Cultural differences will become smaller and smaller until differences fade away altogether. At any rate, as history has shown, it is impossible for humans to have two civilisations living together in the same period. That creates intolerance. Globalisation is going to ensure that we live in one and the same civilisation.



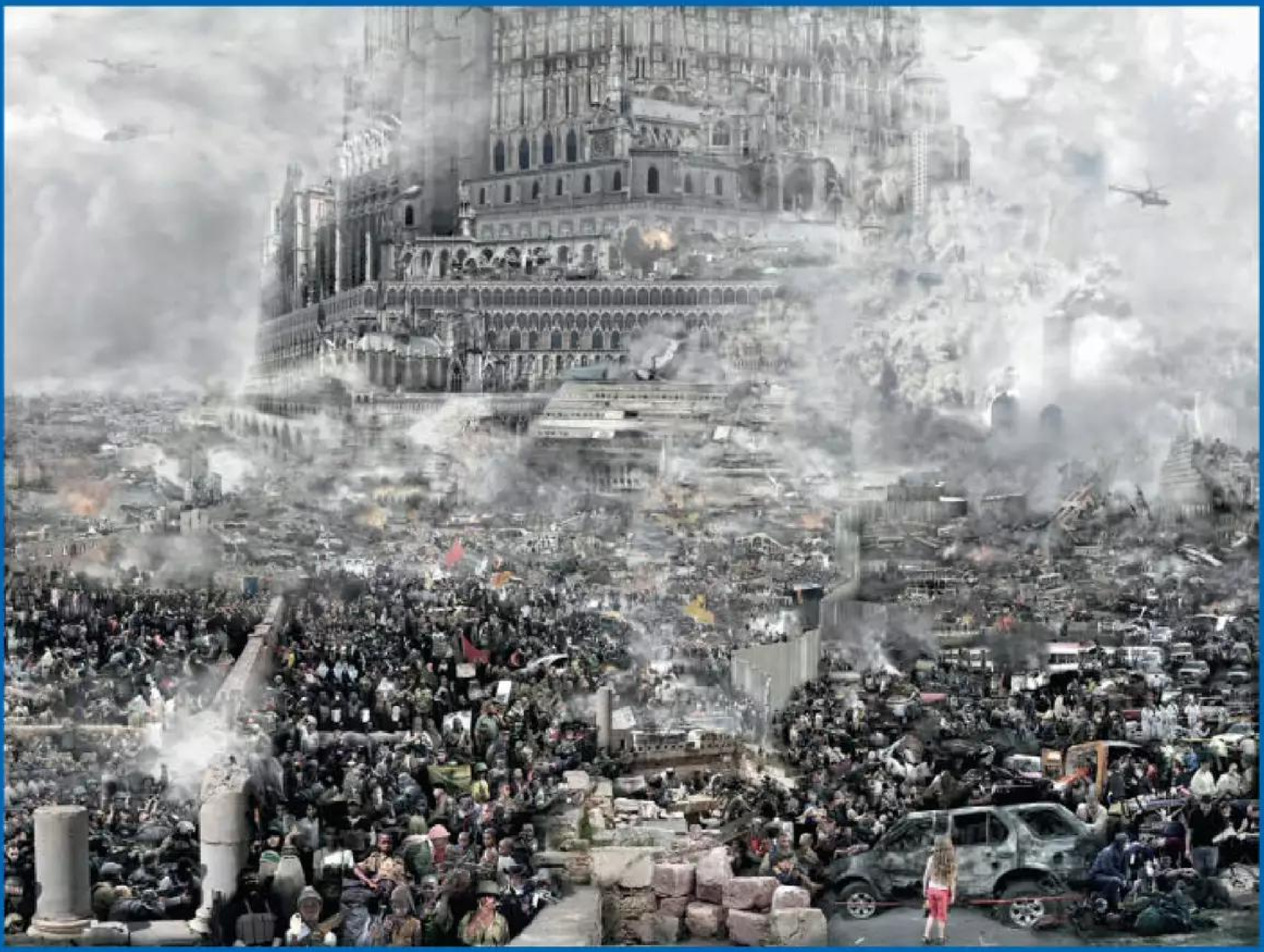
Destruction, **by Du Zhen Jun**

"Because of digital technology… the future of humans, regardless of where they live, will be all the same. Differences will become increasingly smaller."



Old Europe, by **Du Zhen Jun**

"Capitalism through globalisation has won dominance in the world. As with any system, there are those who benefit, but also victims – the marginalised, the poor."

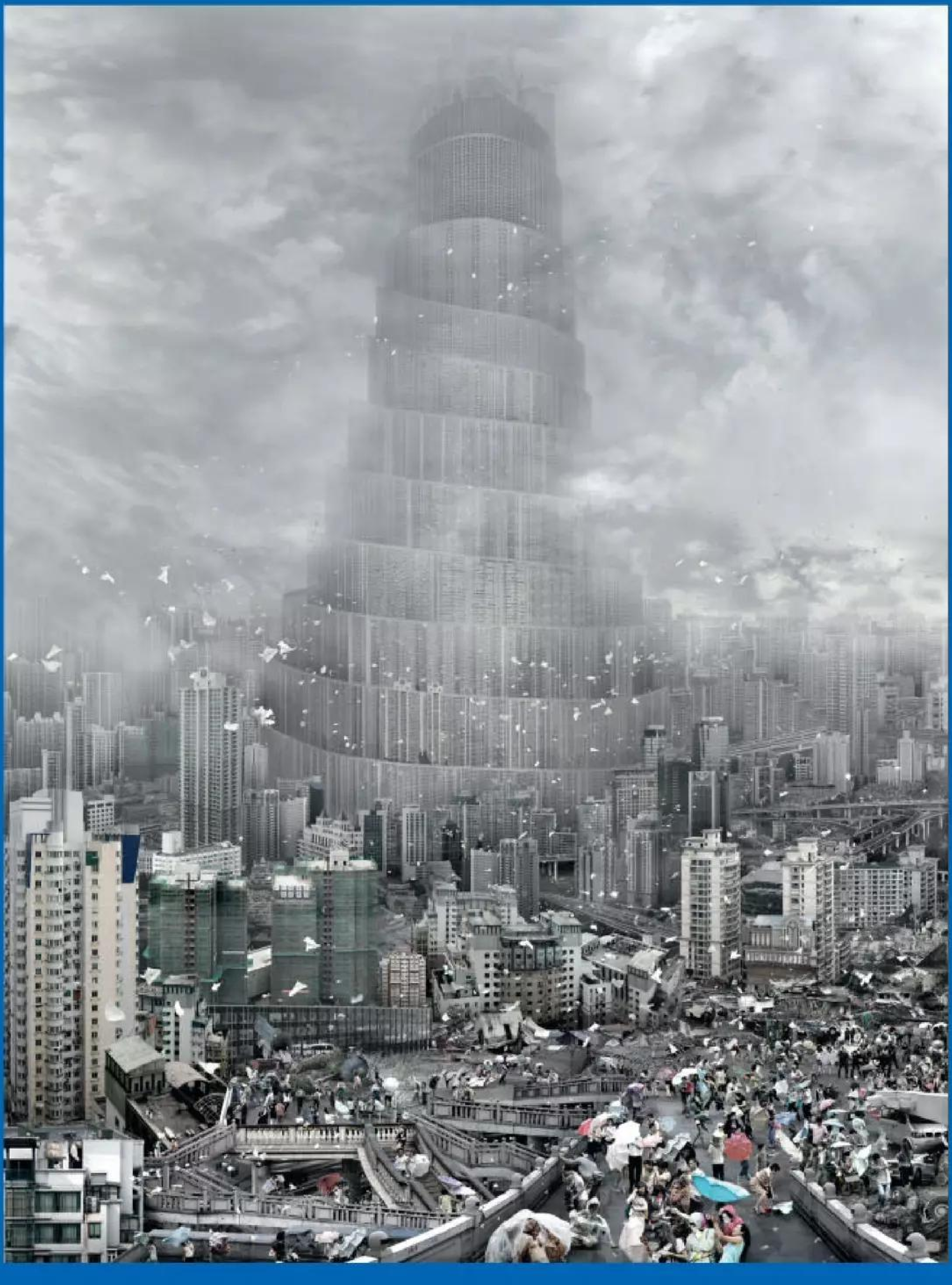


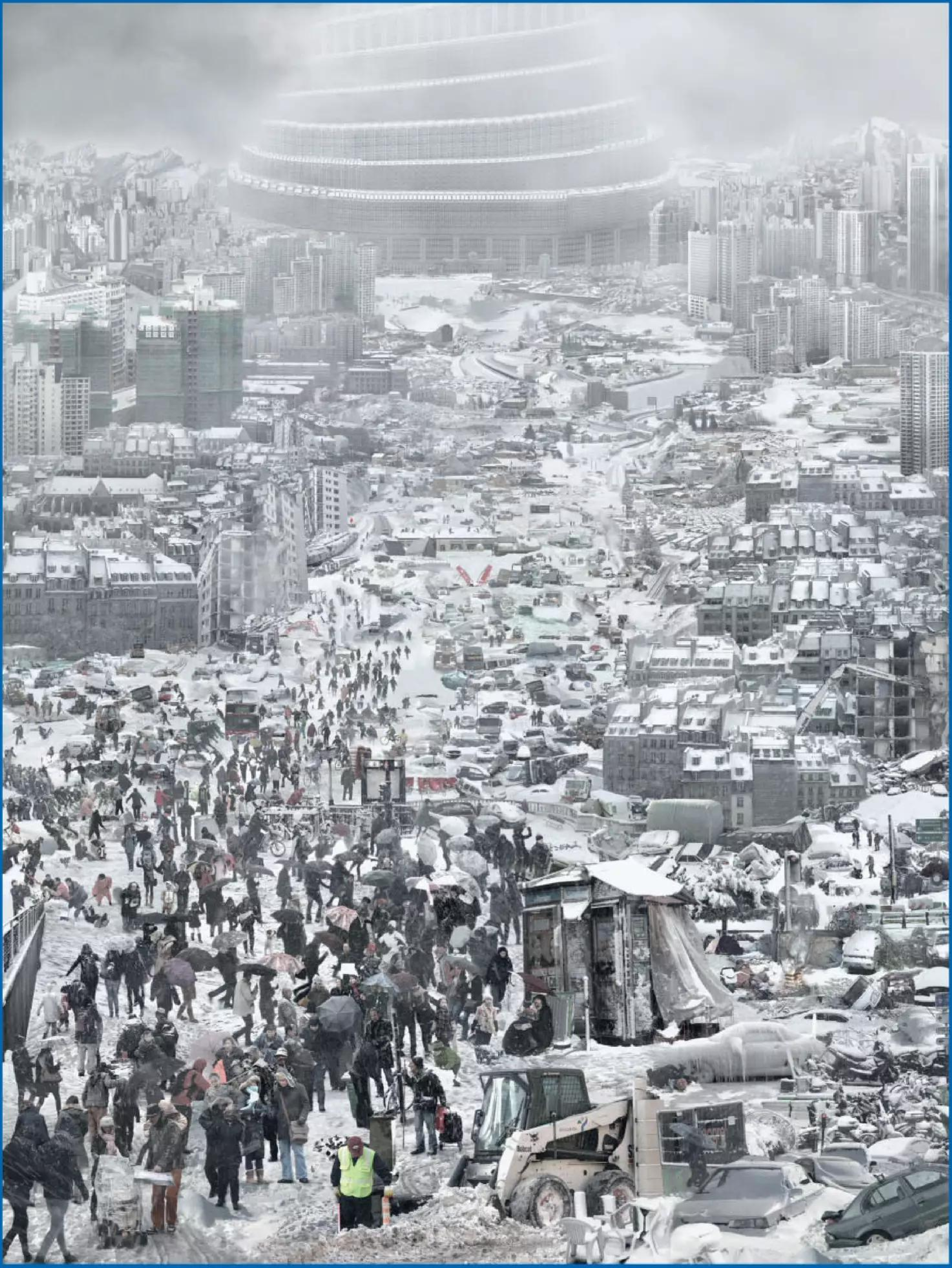
Ran, **by Du Zhen Jun**

"No matter how negative the consequences, we cannot forget that it's human civilisation."

"When what is false is true, what is true is false."

Wind, **by Du Zhen Jun**





Snow, by **Du Zhen Jun**

"Taoists say: 'There are positives in negative consequences. There are negatives in positive consequences.'"

B.F. Skinner

Artwork by Peter Strain

TECHNOLOGY WAS DEVELOPED TO PREVENT EXHAUSTING LABOR NOW IT IS DEDICATED TO TRIVIAL CONVENIENCES

B.F. Skinner

B.F. Skinner

•REC

Have we forgotten how to forget?

by Patrick Stokes

Quick: what's your best friend's phone number?

Don't feel too bad if you couldn't answer off the top of your head. Most likely you've no real reason to commit phone numbers to memory: it's just there in your phone. Perhaps you once had a phone book to store the numbers of your friends and family instead. In either case, an object does the remembering for you. That sleek piece of kit in your pocket or the well-thumbed address book is a small, useful extension of your mind.

'Prosthetic memory' is nothing particularly new. Writing itself has always been a means of storing information as much as communicating it, while the Incan *quipu*, an array of knotted threads, represented a remarkable early technology for holding data too large and too complex to keep in one's head.

Yet the information revolution has generated exponentially more data than ever before. On one estimate, humanity produced a total of around 12 exabytes – that's 12 billion gigabytes – of data before the advent of computers. Then everything changed. Around 2011 we passed 1,000 exabytes, or one zettabyte; by now we're thought to have already passed 8 zettabytes. We are awash in a flood of information that dwarfs anything else in our history. We're creating more of it, and keeping more of it. The storage capacity of the human brain has long since been surpassed. No wonder, then, that we're increasingly dependent on memory prostheses, from libraries to smartphones to massive server warehouses. Our capacity to call up that information is also faster and easier than ever before.

Not everyone thinks this surge in external memory is an unalloyed good. "The Internet never forgets," as the recent saying goes, but forgetting is in fact crucial to being able to process information at all. Viktor Mayer-Schönberger cautions that forgetting is a skill we're increasingly failing to exercise, and we've already crossed a very important threshold in the economics of memory. Historically, memory prostheses were expensive. Technologies such as printing and photography gradually became more affordable, but there was still always some cost associated with producing and storing information, which meant making decisions about what to preserve and what to let slip away.

Today, however, digital storage is so cheap relative to average wages (at least in highly developed countries) that it's costlier to, say, spend time going through your photo files to work out which ones to delete than to simply keep them all. For the first time, remembering is now cheaper than forgetting. No wonder we now simply store things by default.

Store, and share. The affordances of technology also make it easier than ever to share experiences with others. For most of history, creating and transporting text and images was laborious and expensive. Now, you can broadcast anything you see at any time to the entire planet instantly and at trivial

There's a deeper worry: that in recording and sharing so much of our lives we're neglecting to actually live them.

cost. So every banal moment, every breakfast, every generic sunset, every random encounter with a dog or cat finds its way on to social media and off to live forever in the unforgetting electronic ether.

And, of course, the selfies. So, so many selfies.

It's easy to mock this of course, to see curating and sharing the minutiae of our mostly unremarkable lives as narcissistic and crass. There's a deeper worry too: that when we devote ourselves to capturing and sharing the world in this way, something immensely valuable is lost; that in recording and sharing so much of our lives we're neglecting to actually live them. We put something between ourselves and the world – literally, a camera; figuratively, the project of capturing and sharing experience – instead of 'just being in the moment', and so alienate ourselves from experience. We bypass direct encounter with the world altogether, converting it into sharable memory tokens without having experienced it at all.

Like most cultural anxieties, this one actually predates the smartphone era. In an essay published in 1975, the novelist Walker Percy imagines a man who books a tour to see the Grand Canyon. *Seeing* the Grand Canyon is already difficult because 'the Grand Canyon' is already 'preformulated' by a thousand postcards and tourist guidebooks – think of visiting a famous landmark and being struck that *it looks just like it does in pictures.* But, Percy tells us:

> *Seeing the canyon is made even more difficult by what the sight-seer does when the moment arrives, when sovereign knower confronts the thing to be known. Instead of looking at it, he photographs it. There is no confrontation at all. At the end of forty years of preformulation and with the Grand Canyon yawning at his feet, what does he do? He waives his right of seeing and knowing and records symbols for the next forty years. For him there is no present; there is only the past of what has been formulated and seen and the future of what has been formulated and not seen. The present is surrendered to the past and the future.*

A man has come to see a postcard and then turns it into a photo. He never *sees* the Grand Canyon, the thing-in-itself; he is too busy recording it. His present is instantly deferred into the past. As George Connell notes, Percy's tourist is doing something Kierkegaard describes: *remembering the experience while he's still having it.* Both Percy and Kierkegaard are alive to the ways in which we can sometimes displace experience with the recollection in this way, and thereby fail to be in true contact with the world – and with each other.

Such anxieties about the way memory technologies can vacate the present run deep in the Western psyche. Socrates praised speech and worried that writing would atrophy memory; Roland Barthes noted that photographs replace or overwrite our memories; Walter Benjamin lamented that the "aura" of direct presence was stripped from moving pictures, even if he found it still in portrait photography. Counsels to "be in the moment" are no doubt as old as humanity itself. Kierkegaard again, tells us that joy is "to be present to oneself in truth," which in turn is about "to be today, in truth to be today."

But is our social media-driven transformation of memory practices wholly bad? Perhaps, instead of forgetting how to "lose ourselves in the moment" we're simply finding *new* ways to be in the moment, to expand the moment itself by sharing it with more people across both space and time. Or at least, maybe we can learn to make it so.

Worries about a new technology tend to dissipate as the technology becomes commonplace and everyday, and part of that involves the technology becoming *transparent*. Think of the last time you called your best friend. Were you focused on the act of dialling numbers, of how to make your voice sound impressive, of what your call would look like on the screen at the other end? More than likely you weren't, for the technology itself was more or less invisible to you. You simply spoke to your friend.

One thing that *is* easy to forget is that the mass social media era is less than a decade old. If we're still creating and sharing memories in a self-conscious way, perhaps this is simply because we've not yet learned how to do these things without thinking about what we're doing. I suspect we're not far off though. Once the technology has become transparent, we will again be directly acquainted with direct experience – to the extent we ever were – yet with the ability to share experience in ways less bounded by geography and time.

Mayer-Schönberger is right that remembering everything comes at a cost, because forgetting is sometimes essential for being able to live with ourselves and with others. Yet the age of memory has its benefits too. Even sharing all those breakfasts: doesn't the banal deserve to be retained too? Haven't artists in all ages sought out the shocking beauty of the mundane, to make us see the fabric of our daily existence anew? Perhaps we finally have technology that can do what our fragile meat-computers can't: testifying to and protecting all the fleeting moments of a life that would otherwise be lost. N

One thing that is easy to forget is that the mass social media era is less than a decade old.

LIVING PHILOSOPHY

MCDONALD

TOP FIVE BOOKS

1. *Moby Dick*
Herman Melville
2. *The Complete Short Stories*
Franz Kafka
3. *A Room of One's Own*
Virginia Woolf
4. *The Belly of Paris*
Emile Zola
5. *Independent People*
Halldór Laxness

FAVOURITE PHILOSOPHER:

Immanuel Kant followed closely by David Hume.

FAVOURITE QUOTE:

"It is not that we have a short time to live, but that we waste a lot of it. Life is long enough, and a sufficiently generous amount has been given to us for the highest achievements if it were all well invested. But when it is wasted in heedless luxury and spent on no good activity, we are forced at last by death's final constraint to realise that it has passed away before we knew it was passing."
Seneca

DOCUMENTARY TO RECOMMEND:

Life on Earth
David Attenborough

FAVOURITE ARTWORK:

1957. 20#
Mark Rothko

FAVOURITE PIECE OF CLASSICAL MUSIC:

Satyagraha
Phillip Glass

What is philosophy for you?
A way of life, an obsession, and a mechanism for staying very poor. Seriously: the discipline of reasoning about the most fundamental elements of existence and some of the less fundamental elements too.

Why is philosophy important?
Everything else is ephemera. Without philosophy we are just crashing around blindly in the dark. Nothing is more distressing than watching the current crop of bureaucrats demand that philosophy have utility value, it's an indication that the barbarians are winning.

What is the biggest problem we face in contemporary society?
Short-termism and (shallow) utilitarian thinking. They are a lethal combination and they pervade management, politics and policy development everywhere. We are reduced to a life of trivia!

What do you hope to achieve from 'doing' philosophy?
To die not having wasted my life. Doing philosophy is never a waste, even when esoteric.

What is the meaning of life?
To live well, in an Aristotelian sense.

Catherine McDonald is a philosopher based in Melbourne.

LIVING PHILOSOPHY

CHETTY

TOP FIVE BOOKS

1. *Bodies of Color, Bodies of Knowledge*
George Yancy
2. *The Buddha of Suburbia*
Hanif Kureishi
3. *Locomotion*
Jacqueline Woodson
4. *Teaching Community*
Bell Hooks
5. *Learning to Divide The World*
John Willinsky

FAVOURITE PHILOSOPHER:

I'm currently reading a lot of Charles Mills.

FAVOURITE QUOTE:

"Prophetic critics and artists should be exemplars of what it means to be intellectual freedom fighters, that is, cultural workers who simultaneously position themselves within (or alongside) the mainstream while clearly aligned with groups who vow to keep alive potent traditions of critique and resistance."
Cornel West

DOCUMENTARY TO RECOMMEND:

The Stuart Hall Project
John Akomfrah

FAVOURITE ARTWORK

No Woman, No Cry
Chris Ofili

FAVOURITE PIECE OF CLASSICAL MUSIC:

Raga Rageshri – A beautiful piece of music.

What is philosophy for you?
I am taken by Simon Critchley's claim that philosophy begins with "the indeterminate but palpable sense that something desired has not been fulfilled, that a fantastic effort has failed. Philosophy begins in disappointment."

Why is philosophy important?
Because detecting and challenging assumptions is important, especially when assumptions ground values that turn into policy or social practice.

What is the biggest problem we face in contemporary society?
Zara Bain puts it as "systems of domination and violence and corollary cognitive systems that facilitate the denial and erasure of such systems." Whether we can be said to 'face' denial and erasure is another question.

What do you hope to achieve from 'doing' philosophy?
My A-level philosophy teacher, Chris Lawn, described philosophy as a 'B.S. detector'. I still like that idea.

What is the meaning of life?
A Monty Python film. Beyond that, I couldn't tell you.

Darren Chetty is a teacher and Hip Hop Educator in the UK.

LIVING PHILOSOPHY

AYED

TOP FIVE BOOKS

1. Travels with Herodotus
Ryszard Kapuściński
2. My War Gone By, I Miss It So
Anthony Loyd
3. Samarkand
Amin Maalouf
4. A Fine Balance
Rohinton Mistry
5. Happy Families
Carlos Fuentes

FAVOURITE PHILOSOPHER:
Ibn Sina (AKA Avicenna)

FAVOURITE QUOTE:
"For what is evil but good tortured by its own hunger and thirst?"
Kahlil Gibran

DOCUMENTARY TO RECOMMEND:
McCullin

FAVOURITE ARTWORK:
Still Life With Guitar
Juan Gris

FAVOURITE PIECE OF CLASSICAL MUSIC:
Valse-Fantaisie
Mikhail Glinka

What is philosophy for you?
Asking every possible permutation of the question "why".

Why is philosophy important?
Because it is the intellectual equivalent of mindfulness, and meditating on our existence and knowledge is to our collective benefit.

What is the biggest problem we face in contemporary society?
Erosion of empathy.

What do you hope to achieve from 'doing' philosophy?
To learn. Is there anything else in life?

What is the meaning of life?
The joy, and obligation, of adding to our body of knowledge, then passing it on to those lucky enough to come later.

Nahlah Ayed is an author and journalist at CBC News.

LIVING PHILOSOPHY

HENSHAW

TOP FIVE BOOKS

1. *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*
Douglas Adams
2. *Catch-22*
Joseph Heller
3. *Lamb: The Gospel According to Biff, Christ's Childhood Pal*
Christopher Moore
4. *A Confederacy of Dunces*
John Kennedy Toole
5. *Good Omens*
Terry Pratchett and Neil Gaiman

FAVOURITE PHILOSOPHER:
Voltaire

FAVOURITE QUOTE:
"Doubt is not a pleasant condition, but certainty is absurd."
Voltaire

DOCUMENTARY TO RECOMMEND:
The Fabric of the Cosmos
Brian Greene

FAVOURITE ARTWORK:
Expansion
Paige Bradley

FAVOURITE PIECE OF CLASSICAL MUSIC:
Britten: Four Sea Interludes
Peter Grimes

What is philosophy for you?
The active questioning and exploration of everything and every idea.

Why is philosophy important?
It is essential to learn to question the reality that is presented to us by our senses and by other people. Philosophy teaches us these skills.

What is the biggest problem we face in contemporary society?
Ignorance and blind acceptance/obedience.

What do you hope to achieve from 'doing' philosophy?
Helping young people question assumptions and expand their thinking.

What is the meaning of life?
Life has no intrinsic meaning. We collaboratively construct meaning from the narratives we create in our interactions with other people and our surroundings.

Greg Henshaw is Deputy Principal and Philosophy Teacher at North Sydney Girls High School.

SLOW

Photographs: US Library of Congress

GREAT NEWS
GREAT NEWS

Neandertron

Neandertron

by DBC Pierre

Let's get this in proper perspective. According to the Smithsonian Institution we were making tools 2.6 million years ago. Granted: not angle-grinders. We're talking stone hammers and sharpened stone flakes that you'd have to be an archaeologist to tell apart from average rubble. But then whoosh – bang! – a million years later we'd come up with hand-axes. Sure, they were still made of stone, and frankly you'd still want a good eye to spot them in a pile of rocks. But wow: progress. We messed about with hammer-stones and flakes for a million years – *thirty-thousand generations* – before someone finally said, "Hang on, why don't we just sharpen the hammer?"

This is the average speed of human progress. If we draw a line from our beginnings in the trees to the digital watch, this is the vertiginous pelt alongside which our genetic and neurological abandonment of other apes played out. On the scale of a sheet of office paper the technological line is basically flat. The patient is dead. Depending on who you ask, the genetic line might shift between one and four per cent.

The hand-axe: did we stop there? No way José, there's no stopping plucky bipedal locomotors when we get going. Barely 1.4 million years later – *fourteen thousand centuries after the hand-axe* – we thought of putting a handle on it. This seems to have been a decisive step, because presto, scarcely 200,000 years later we stood around a steam engine. 350 years after that we had slimming machines. Thirty more years, Pac-Man. Fourteen, Bluetooth; four, search engines, all the way to the new Pet-Feeding Open-Source Robot. And the rest, as we say, is history.

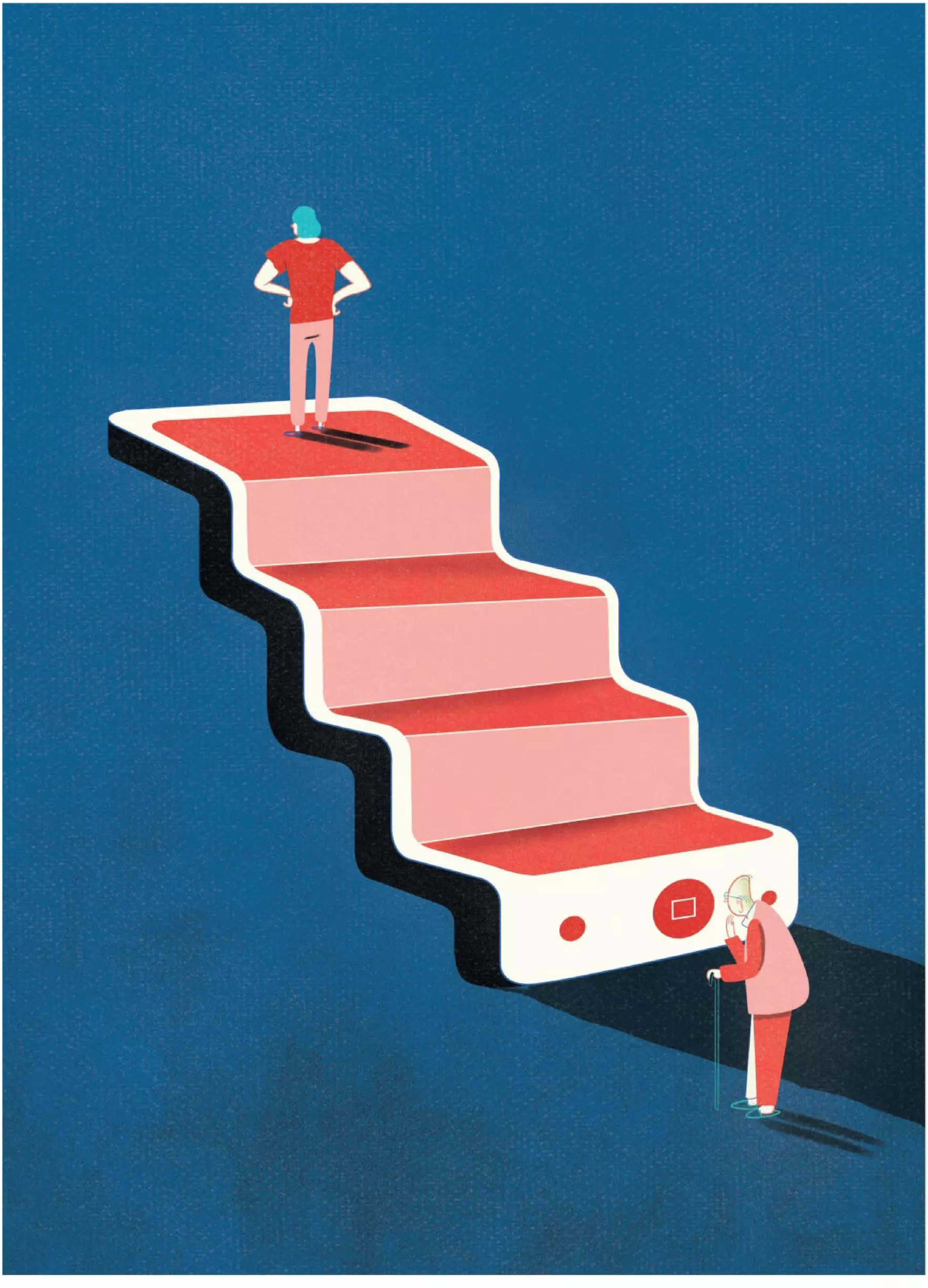
Where I want to go with it all is here: if we actually drew the curve from the day we stood upright to the pet-feeding robot, it lies flat for all but 0.006 per cent of our history. Then it turns vertical. So we're at vertical. And vertical being – well, vertical, like canoeing an ascending waterfall – it's become easy to forget the human equation in all of it, which is that if we're adaptive creatures then the lifestyle we've adapted to during 99.994 per cent of our history has been flat. Hell, it took us a million-and-a-half years to figure out an axe handle. So that existentially there can have been no noticeable change across a human lifespan, moreover no *awareness or expectation of change*, no mechanism for it, bar for the stuff we've always done to each other as jolly hominids. As lived, human life has been static. Perhaps only the five most recent generations can say that their children used different tools than they, and lived knowing that their own brood would use different ones again. Those figures once more: five generations of toolmakers out of a conservative eighty-thousand. To adaptation then, which science assures us is underway: have we become wireless transmitting creatures with thirty digits and a choice of virtual genitals? No. We remain at best four per cent different from chimpanzees. We were probably already that different from chimpanzees when we invented the hand-axe. Our first

We were still chimpanzees; but nothing makes you forget that faster than your own smartphone.

cooked meals could have made us that different, who knows.

It seems that somehow after the axe-handle the future overtook us like a low-flying jet. We heard it coming for about a second before it was gone up ahead forever; and in that giddy time we enthused and grew clucky, started dreaming of it as one dreams of new fabrics for the caravan. We were still chimpanzees; but nothing makes you forget that faster than your own smartphone. Jacket notes from Egon Larsen's 1957 book *You'll See: Report From The Future*, give a taste of our elation:

> *Suppose you were to go to sleep tonight and not wake up for twenty-five years. What would the world be like then? This book tells you what it could be like. It has two main distinctions from other works which hazard a picture of the future: first, most of its readers will be alive to see the world; second, at the end of the book the author details the scientific discoveries and inventions, the developments and trends on which his predictions are based, and he furnishes ample evidence in the form of some startling photographs of laboratory experiments, models, and prototypes from a number of countries. Thus the book is no idle speculation – it is mainly based on fact.*
>
> *Waking after having spent the intervening years in deep-freeze hibernation, he describes the world he sees as any reporter would portray some hitherto unknown country. It is a strange world, much better than our pessimistic prophets assume, but not without its peculiar problems and difficulties. War is a thing of the past, and a benevolent though somewhat bureaucratic World Government is in charge of mankind's fate, while a very rich scientific foundation suggests and backs new developments. Instead of wasting their resources on armaments, the nations have succeeded in ending poverty; as a result, racial and religious prejudices have largely disappeared.*
>
> *India is the industrial giant of Asia, and the Sahara is irrigated to become the world's fruit garden. Helicopters are as common as cars today, and nuclear power, tapped by the "atomic battery" system, has changed the face of the "under-developed" areas. Monorail trains and fast passenger submarines have been introduced, new*



Neandertron

foods developed, and the "killer" diseases conquered – the expectation of life for a child born then is a hundred and twenty years. With almost complete automation, there is a twenty-four hour week. Pedestrian roads at first-floor level have eased the traffic problems of the big cities. A daily "rain hour", choosing marriage partners by TV, rooms adjustable for size and shape, electronic coloured light from the walls, shopping by pneumatic tube, hypnotic sleep as a psycho-therapeutic treatment, newspapers printed at home by facsimile-reproduction – it is a brave and amazing new world...

That author was looking forward to 1982. Apart from the charm of knowing there was once a time when we thought technology would liberate and serve us as humans, the impulse behind Larsen's writings was spot-on: the curve was turning vertical, it was palpable to him. But from today's perspective his predictions only tell us what we kind of knew all along – that technology doesn't liberate. Only humans can liberate. Except we don't do it either. We don't know how things will pan out because we have no say in them. Human nature: the missing ingredient in every equation.

But then how about this: tidal waves, vortices, hurricanes don't stampede in isolation, they pull in power from around them, set up systems and sub-systems that balance and counter and feed. And as part of a particulate universe, as organic agents of change, we must be subject to similar dynamics. It makes me ask how we're countering, balancing, feeding the chimp that technology can't change; consoling, boosting, rescuing him from being left behind. And when you look at the most conspicuous changes, there might be a pattern there. Put aside the fact that money is the driver, and what is it we supposedly "ask" for more and more of? Actually not axe-handles, steam engines or search engines. Rather we're gorging on ways to scrutinise ourselves. Ways to watch the ape. Ways to express and rehearse human outcomes. Music, entertainment, media – the arts. They literally make the new world a house of mirrors. Sure, we always had song and painting and theatre – but look at them now. We drive with them, fly with them, sleep with them, make love with them, work with them, and when we knock off from all that, we watch them again on screens. We're suddenly fascinated by ourselves – or is it more? Isn't there a frenzied edge to our media, a sense of cramming?

It makes me wonder if we haven't commandeered half of all technology for the psyche, the hand-axe wielder inside us who reels about trying to position an identity. Because who are we now? When our mothering, our horsemanship, our knowledge of the land, our meekness, even our desktop computers don't count anymore?

No amount of tattoos will keep us grounded, we could pierce every cuticle and still be yesterday's ape; the landscape has stopped being still. So maybe here we are acting, singing, playing, writing, painting a program of therapy, rehearsing new roles in their millions. Following ourselves overtly and covertly, as if for the first time. Maybe Jean Cocteau was bang-on when he said: "Art is science made clear."

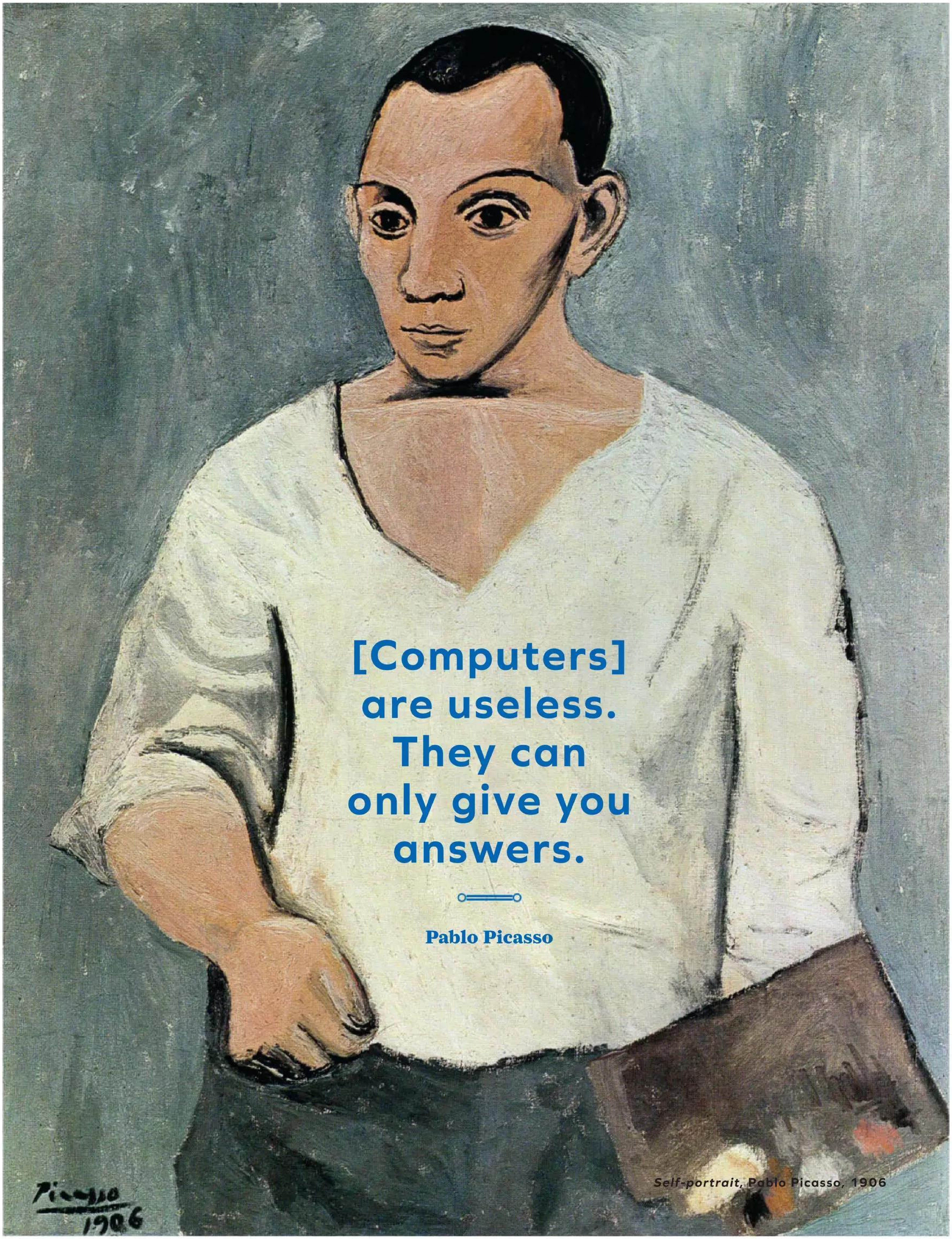
Because, you know, it often seems to me that we don't have that big an issue with technology per se. We don't seem all that thrown by our gadgets and ideas, our devices that communicate at a distance; not even with the contraption that can instantly transmit a hundred and forty characters of meaningful text to the world.

Our only perennial puzzle, one that technology still can't solve:

Why we deploy those tools to transmit: "Ashley just farted".

In the end maybe only our devices made it down from the trees. ◼

No amount of tattoos will keep us grounded, we could pierce every cuticle and still be yesterday's ape.



> **[Computers] are useless. They can only give you answers.**

Pablo Picasso

Self-portrait, Pablo Picasso, 1906

Pablo Picasso

The end of the world

by André Dao

"The world's at an end," said the university bookseller to the king's furrier. "It's the accursed inventions of the age that are ruining everything – the artillery – the serpentines – the bombards – and above all, the printing press, that other German pest! No more manuscripts – no more books! Printing puts an end to book selling – the end of the world is at hand!"

The irony of a bookseller lamenting the demise of books at the hands of the printing press would not have been lost on the early 19th century readers of Victor Hugo's *Notre-Dame de Paris*, who read these words printed in the very product of Gutenberg's devilish invention: the mass-produced novel. Yet the lament is not entirely satirical. The bookseller and the furrier are part of the huge Parisian crowd gathered in the Great Hall for the election of the Fool's Pope on January 6, 1482, and within this scene they represent the old guard – two grumpy curmudgeons complaining about change (the furrier also bemoans the rise of velvet over fur in medieval fashion) – contrasted with the rowdy young students nearby. But for all the self-indulgence of the bookseller's complaints, they also have the ring of truth. Later on in the novel, Hugo's narrator refers to the "terror and dazzled amazement of the men of the sanctuary, in the presence of the luminous press of Gutenberg." Why are they so afraid? Because they can see "intelligence sapping faith, opinion dethroning belief." The principal change wrought by the printing press was the proliferation of knowledge formerly entrapped in painstakingly handwritten manuscripts that were available only to the rich and powerful. Now that knowledge could be mass-produced, the university bookseller and educated priests now stood to lose their respective monopolies. In the words of Hugo's narrator: "The press will kill the church."

The bookseller's anxiety about the printing press is part of a long and venerable tradition of antipathy towards technology suspected of changing not only the way we do things, but the way we think. No less an authority than Socrates thought that writing – as opposed to speaking – would lead to the stagnation of the mind, as we came to rely on "external written characters" to recall information rather than drawing on our own knowledge. Writing, said Socrates, was "an aid not to memory, but to reminiscence," and gave to readers, "not truth, but the semblance of truth; they will be hearers of many things and will have learned nothing; they will appear to be omniscient and will generally know nothing; they will be tiresome company, having the show of wisdom without the reality."

While there are few contemporary voices raised against the written word, Socrates' misgivings are remarkably similar to those we have about the Internet. In a much-discussed 2008 article, journalist and author Nicholas Carr wrote of his concern that the Internet was affecting his ability to concentrate – and in particular, his ability to read in depth and at length. Citing his own difficulties with reading the way he used to, Carr speculated that hyperlinks and tabbed browsing might be to blame, encouraging readers to skim across a great number of articles rather than reading any one of them in depth. He referred to a study conducted by the University College London that examined the browsing habits of visitors to two popular research sites, and concluded that it was clear that "users are not reading online in the traditional sense; indeed there are signs that new forms of 'reading' are emerging as users 'power browse' horizontally through titles, contents pages, and abstracts, going for quick wins."

The worry is a Socratic one: that this wonderful new technology, like writing itself, will only give us the shadow of knowledge – information. Or, as cognitive neuroscientist Maryanne Wolf has put it, the advent of the Internet means that people are destined to become mere "decoders of information who have neither the time nor the motivation to think beneath or beyond their googled universes".

There is a temptation to dismiss these concerns as mere Luddism, the complaints of an older generation faced with changes they don't understand and which they fear, like the bookseller, will put them out of work. But as Marshall McLuhan has argued, the medium through which we communicate our thoughts is not passive – it actively shapes the process of our thinking.

A recurring battlecry of those who believe, as McLuhan did, that the medium is the message, is the oft-announced death of the novel. Though it's been dying, by some accounts, since the early 20th century, its final demise – for those who believe in its mortality – has been inexorably hastened by the emergence of the world wide web. Will Self, a prominent harbinger of the novel's end, has argued that if we accept that in 20 years almost all the text we read will be on digital devices connected to the web, then we must also accept that it is extremely unlikely that we will then choose to voluntarily disable that connectivity. The question is, what will be lost when we gain all that instant information and gratification? For Self, it is the unique method of communication afforded by novels, or indeed any long-form prose: "the capability words have when arranged sequentially to both mimic the free flow of human thought and investigate the physical expressions and interactions of thinking subjects; the way they may be shaped into a believable simulacra of either the commonsensical world or any number of invented ones."

In this respect, Self follows in the footsteps of both McLuhan and Neil Postman, another media theorist whose work could be summarised into a pithy aphorism: "form excludes content". What Postman meant by that was that a particular medium can only sustain a certain level of ideas. Writing primarily in the '80s and '90s, Postman was particularly concerned with the rise of televisual culture. Television, he argued, is a form which is best suited to entertainment. Its reliance on superficial images, and the packaging of content into digestible 30- or 60-minute segments, necessitates a certain degree of over-simplification. Prose, on the other hand, is essential to rational, logical thought, and the mass communication of such thought without losing its complexity. In an age when other media crowds out the written form – whether that be TV or the Internet – the logical conclusion of "form excludes content" is the worry that our capacity for complex, reasoned thought will be correspondingly diminished.

But we should be hesitant to heed these auguries of the end of civilisation, lest we become figures of fun like Hugo's booksellers. For his part, Hugo did not deny that enormous transformations in the way we communicate would lead to upheaval.

But he also remained cautiously optimistic about those transformations, and his hope that the printing press might bring as much benefit as mischief could as easily be applied to the Internet: "It is a construction which increases and piles up in endless spirals; there also are confusion of tongues, incessant activity, indefatigable labour, eager competition of all humanity, refuge promised to intelligence, a new Flood against an overflow of barbarians. It is the second Tower of Babel of the human race." N

The worry is a Socratic one: that this wonderful new technology, like writing itself, will only give us the shadow of knowledge – information.

The end of the world

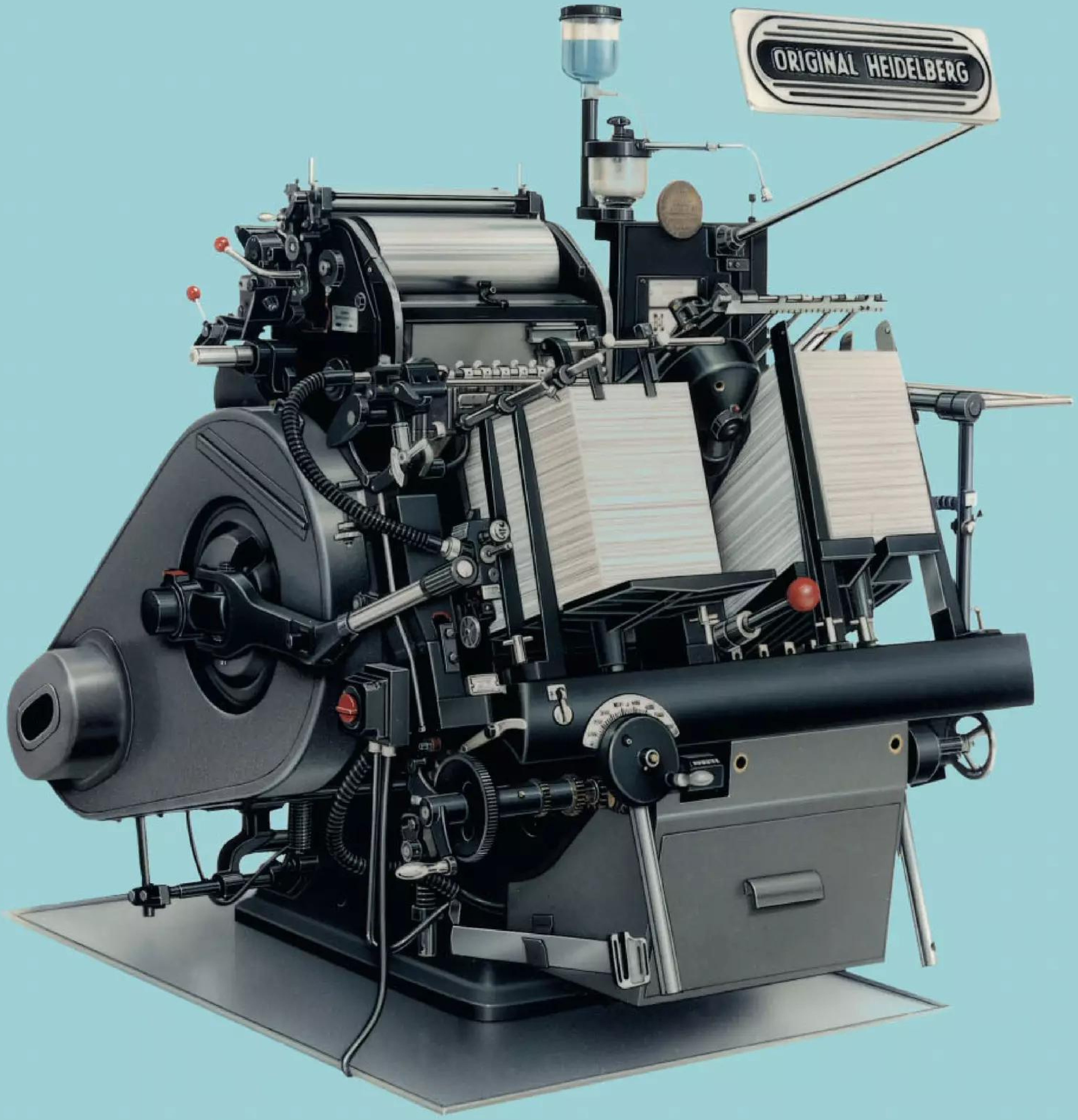

ORIGINAL HEIDELBERG

Photo: Heidelberg Tiegel Repro, Lossen fotografie

Ethical children

Questions from and answers for children, by Matthew Beard

Q: How do you learn to be a parent?

A: In some ways, you learn to be a parent by having a child! You can read lots of books about how to change a nappy, get a baby to sleep, or pick the right school, but sometimes experience matters.

Think about when you first learned to play a sport or a musical instrument. You saw other people do it, maybe someone helped you to start with, but unless you tried it yourself, practised and made mistakes, you wouldn't have learned, would you? Parenting is the same in some ways. But there are a couple of things we can do to learn to be a parent. Our parents teach us how to be good people, so we can practice by learning as much as we can about how to be good. We can also look to examples of really good parents and try to do similar things to them. If you think your Mum, Dad, Grandma, or Uncle was really good at raising you, when you first become a parent you might ask, "How would Grandma fix this problem?"

Q: Why do some people like making fun of others?

A: If you asked bullies, they probably couldn't tell you why they like making fun of others – they've probably never thought much about it. But most of us have probably said something mean or laughed at someone who didn't deserve it.

There are lots of reasons we make fun of others. One common reason is to make them act differently. One of the ways that societies teach people right and wrong is by making people who behave badly feel ashamed or embarrassed.

When we feel made fun of we quickly learn that whatever we did to get teased may be wrong – and we try not to do it again.

Sadly, a lot of the time people embarrass other people to try to teach a lesson that doesn't need to be taught. Sometimes people get made fun of when they've done nothing wrong, just because they're different. That's not teaching a lesson, it's bullying.

There's no good reason for doing that: it's wrong. So even if embarrassing people works to change how they behave, we should be very careful about when we do it. Maybe we shouldn't do it at all.

Ethical dilemma

by Matthew Beard

Q: I'm simply unable to find a suitable partner. Should I look for love online?

A: More people are turning to a variety of Internet services and apps to look for love. The Pew Research Centre says 20 per cent of 25 to 34-year-olds are now dating digitally. Is it worth taking a shot?

It really depends on what you don't like about dating in the physical world. It's only by knowing what's unsuitable there, and what advantages online dating offer, that you can work out whether it'll be a good move.

Online dating provides a range of advantages. If you're living in a small community, have just moved to a new neighbourhood, or just don't spend much time in the kinds of haunts where singles mingle, online dating might be a great resource.

It also takes the ambiguity out of dating. You might chat with someone at a bar or a bookstore for twenty minutes, completely unsure of whether they are romantically available or interested in you. By contrast, on a dating site you know people are open to being approached, which makes it easier to do so.

However lots of people aren't luckless in love for the above reasons – and there is always a chance online dating could make things worse.

The medium of online dating is restrictive. It forces you to engage with the other person in particular ways. Specifically, it forces you to engage with them from a safe distance. Alain Badiou describes this as "risk free" – you are obliged to decide in advance the characteristics of your ideal partner and choose accordingly. That might be great if you know what you're looking for, but love has the unique ability to surprise us.

So if you're the type of person who is already fussy or overly critical of potential partners there is a chance online dating will exacerbate this. Perhaps what is needed here is a type of engagement that leaves you fully open to the individuality and difference presented by the other – something online dating isn't particularly good at expressing.

Remember: online dating is a service. Like any service it can only cater to a limited number of needs. Think about what you want for your romantic life and what online dating provides, but be mindful of the medium – we shouldn't be overly conditional in our relationships with others. ◼

Matthew Beard is a moral philosopher and resident ethicist at The Ethics Centre. He holds a PhD in Philosophy from the University of Notre Dame.

forever
young
young is the
new black

Can technology save us?

by Damon Young

Back when grunge was fast becoming a department store fashion, a bold new hope for civilisation appeared. It was lauded by academics, commentators, and politicians: the Internet was going to emancipate and democratise the world. It enabled the free flow of information and goods. Everyone was an author, with all the power this suggested. It allowed users to play with their identities, resisting older, fixed notions of selfhood. Theorists proclaimed that its decentralised, grass-like character – 'rhizome' was one of the era's buzzwords – would resist authoritarianism. During a visit to China, Bill Clinton told reporters that trying to crack down on the Internet was "sort of like trying to nail Jell-O to the wall."

Almost two decades later and the Chinese government has, famously, a very large wall. There and elsewhere, electronic filtering and redirecting, surveillance and content alteration are common. The Internet's liberating vigour was greatly overrated. Politically and economically, capital remains in the hands of the few – only their investments have changed. As Kentaro Toyama recently put it in *The Atlantic*, the "'Internet is not, nor will ever be, the primary, systematic cause of real political change any more than lanterns – 'one if by land, two if by sea' – were the primary cause of the American revolution."

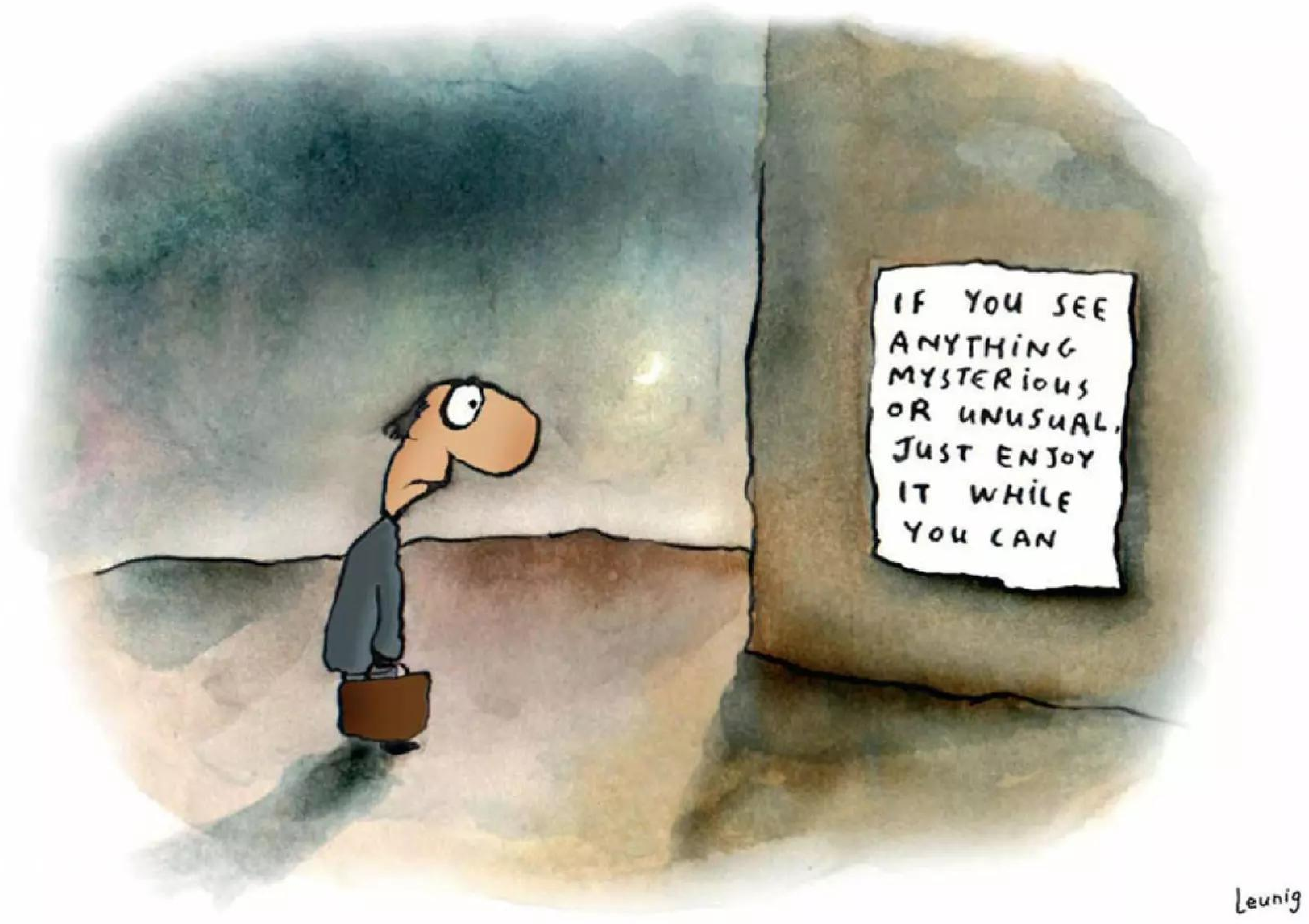
A more profound mistake is at work here. It concerns not just the Internet, but technology in general. It is the expectation that technology can and will solve problems; that the future will be better because technology will have made it so; that many of us can wait for machines and code to fix things.

This is not surprising. Technology is about problem-solving. As Aristotle revealed in his study of *techne*, or craft, its rationality is instrumental. Technology realises possibilities which would not otherwise be, and it does so reliably – or is supposed to. It is a specific means to specific ends.

But it is naïve to believe that technological innovation always embodies the ends we desire, or will achieve only those ends. Most obviously, engineers and scientists do not always make objects because they care about the outcomes. David Hume noted in his *A Treatise of Human Nature* that experts sometimes labour because they enjoy their work, not because they esteem the welfare of their community.

This is no attack on so-called 'blue sky' research, which is vital to the enrichment of knowledge. What's dubious is the belief that widgets exist because they are helpful – sometimes their genesis is curiosity.

More often, other motives drive novelty. The businesses that fund and hype technology often have very different ends to those of the buyers and users. For example, skin creams are marketed as innovative rejuvenating agents: making older skin younger, with cutting-edge medical research on enzymes, cellular replenishment, and so on. There is no evidence


IF YOU SEE ANYTHING MYSTERIOUS OR UNUSUAL, JUST ENJOY IT WHILE YOU CAN
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that they can achieve this, despite advertising "clinically proven" results. They are also helping to create the problem itself: heightened anxiety over ageing, and the manic celebration of youth.

Put another way, the ultimate end of many products is profit not utility – exchange value, not use value. And this logic can create more grief than it overcomes. When businesses are driven chiefly by income or shareholder returns, we should not be surprised when their gadgets are superfluous at best; sold with a wink and a whispered promise, to make a few bucks.

In fact, sometimes this outlook can be profoundly dangerous, even when the technologies are useful. Transport, logistics, communication, and the energy to power it all – all of these are vital to modern life. But they also require waste and pollution on a global scale. It is partly because the biosphere is not valued – or is ranked far lower than profit – that companies have treated this necessity as a handy gratuity, or as non-existent. The result: international problems perhaps too wicked to solve.

Technological Pollyannas also ignore the use of tools. The Chinese government is using many of the same instruments as companies in the west – in fact, it often has their cooperation. But their aims diverge: controlling dissent, rather than profit margins. The same is true of western governments. While politicians publicly lionise freedom and confidentiality, their agencies are invading privacy. They collect personal data from companies, tap into servers and undersea cables, persuade companies to compromise their encryption – all while restricting their own information for commercial confidentiality or national security. This is neither democratic nor liberal, and points to a genuine struggle between authority and autonomy.

Put more generally, human existence involves the conflict of values. We are, as Aristotle observed and Hannah Arendt celebrated, political animals. Not because we are all party apparatchiks, but because we cannot escape the basic condition of social plurality. There is no magical space apart from political and ethical strife, and it is foolish to believe that technology can be deployed without co-option by *some* human end.

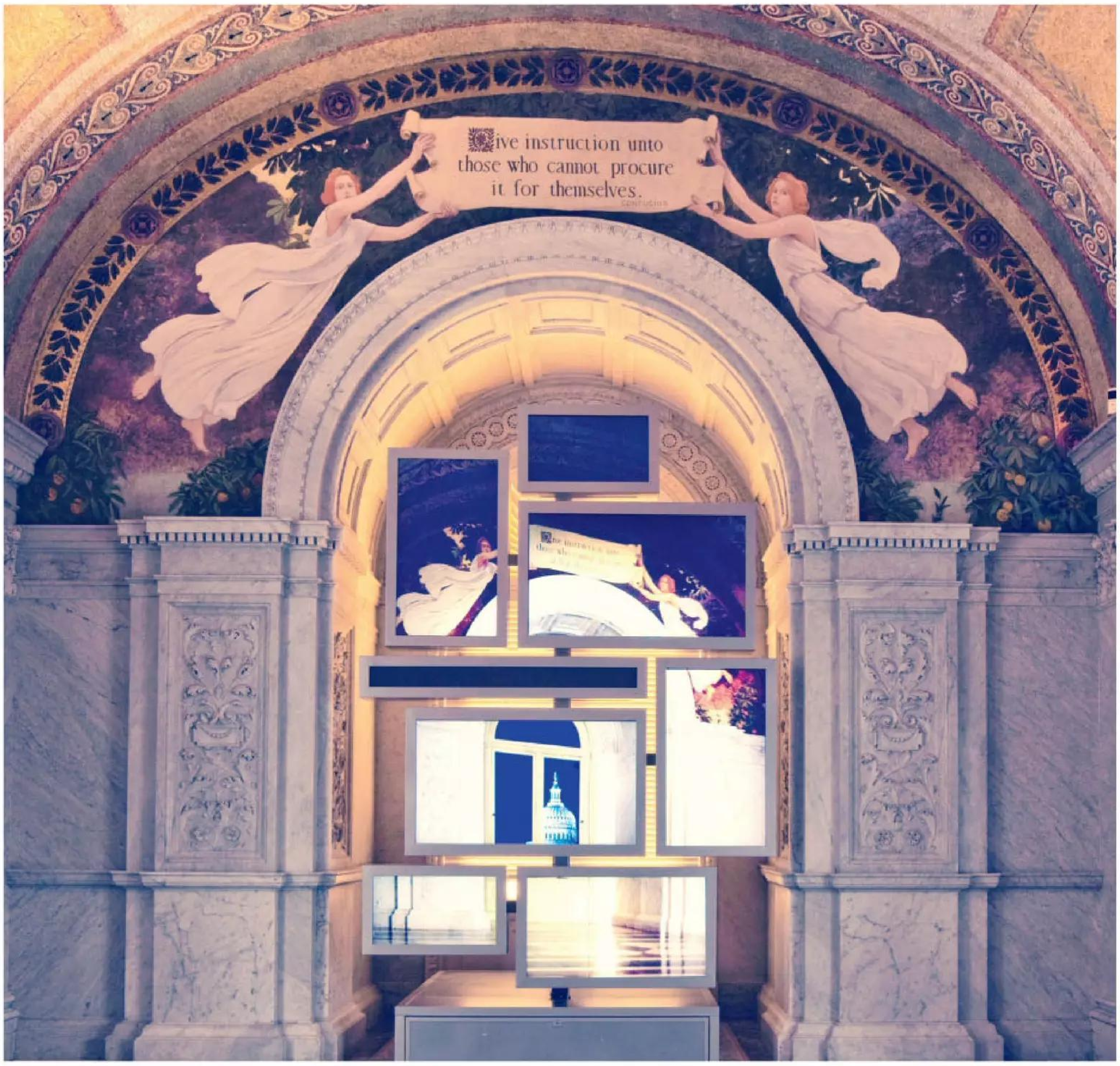
For the same reason, it is naïve to believe that these problems will be solved in the future. Regardless of how swiftly technology develops, there will never be a time without discord. Even if everyone agreed on our troubles and how to overcome them (a huge 'if'), nothing would stop interest groups from selfishly doing otherwise. This happened with tobacco, is happening now with fossil fuels, and will continue with other businesses, lobbyists, and parties. Humans are a divided and fractious species.

There are also some problems that technology cannot solve. Not because it is too sluggish, fragile, or clumsy, but because not all problems are instrumental. Machines can no more do ethics than they can have existential crises. They can help to change circumstances, but they cannot reflect on their value or morality. For example, a cheap pump can increase water supply in a drought, avoiding brutal resource conflicts. But technology cannot persuade the community to install, operate, and maintain this pump, or aid organisations to support this project instead of a cheap laptop program.

This highlights the intimate but asymmetric relationship between humanity and its instruments. We are a tool-making species, but we are not ourselves tools. We have our own ends – in fact, we *are* ends. Technology can nudge, encourage, invite; it can amplify or diminish, accelerate or slow down. It is no neutral bystander. But its agency is limited, and its consciousness non-existent.

We have to decide what vision of the good life compels us, and commit to it. Humanity is an ongoing question, and technology cannot answer on our behalf. ▣

Photo: Carol M. Highsmith


Give instruction unto those who cannot procure it for themselves.
CONFUCIUS

Caught in the net

by Jessa Gamble

Every great work of culture, be it a scientific breakthrough or a literary masterpiece, was achieved by a person who, at minimum, was able to pay attention. The trouble is, we now live in a wired world of interruption. An American teenager exchanges around 100 text messages per day, and adults are no less distracted – an office worker will glance at her inbox between 30 and 40 times per hour. Each of these eye movements and pings represents a small break in attention.

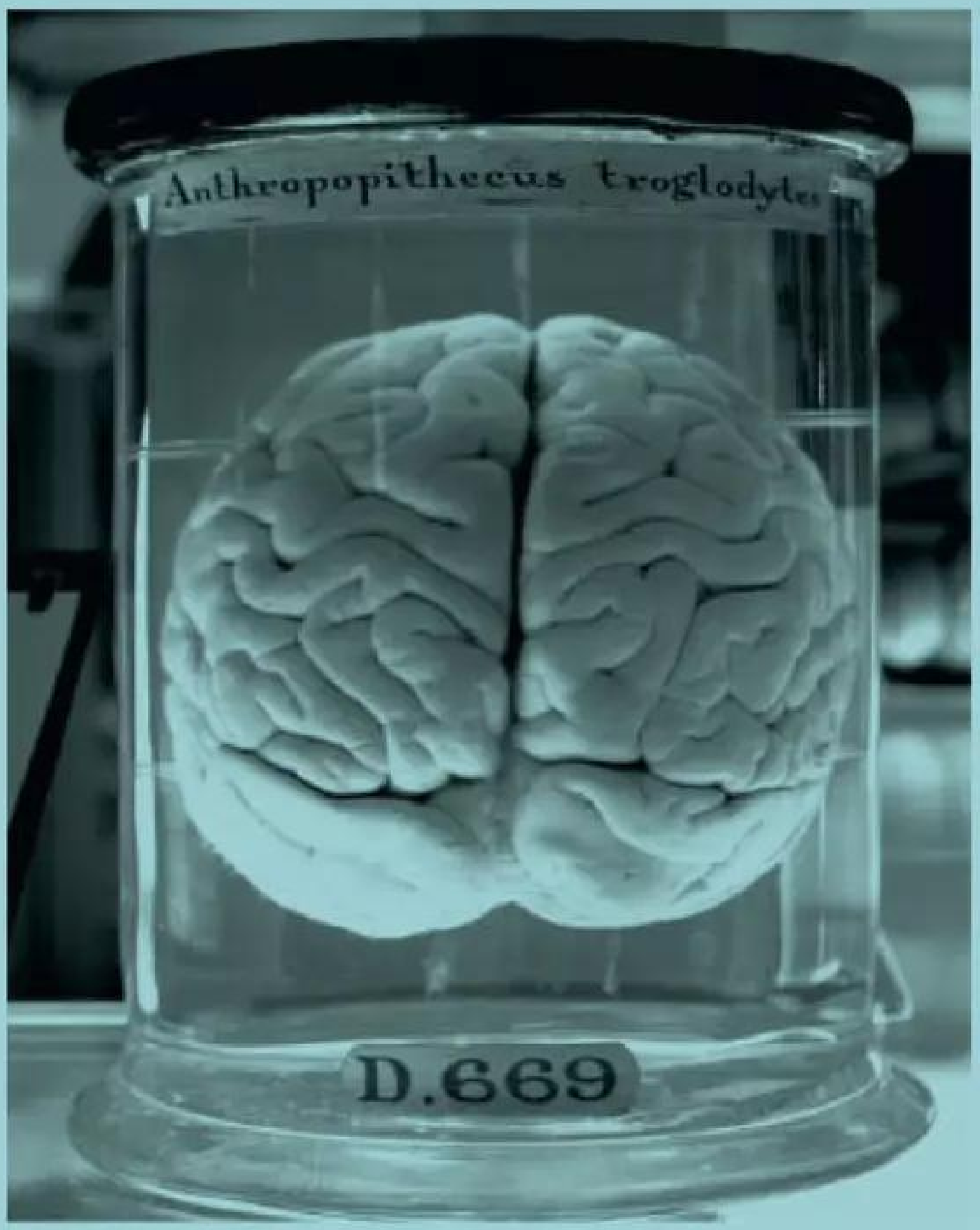


Photo: Gaetan Lee

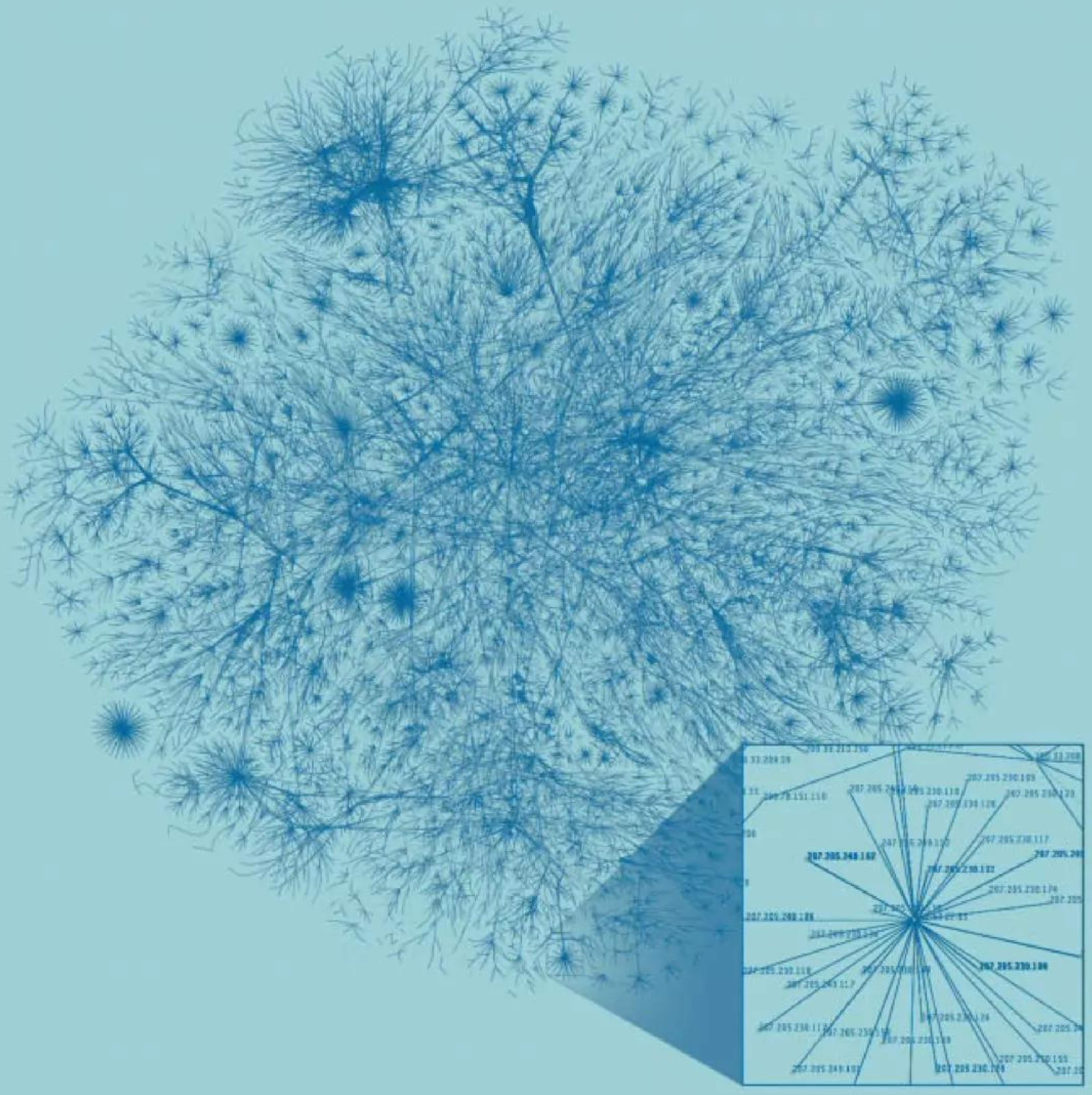
On some level, we enjoy this harassment, because new information – whether important or trivial – is inherently rewarding to our novelty-seeking brains. Its cumulative effect, however, is more worrying. Technology writer Nicholas Carr believes that the Internet is disrupting our ability to think deeply, and even rendering our individual personalities less distinctive.

The tools we use to feed our thoughts – our intellectual technologies – also shape them. Take the map, for instance. Traditional wayfinding is a multi-sensory activity that uses the Sun, stars, and land features for navigation. When the map was developed, it extended our familiar territory – but it also brought abstract representations into contemporary minds. Those abstractions were overlaid not only on our physical spaces but also on our habits of thinking. Similarly, the mechanical clock disrupted the intuitive experience of time as a subjective flow. Its never-ending drumbeat of hours, minutes, and seconds introduced a new emphasis on precise measurement and scientific thinking.

Perhaps the best counterpoint to our Internet age distractibility is a technology that facilitates just the opposite style of thought: the book. Even before Gutenberg brought the printed word to the masses, another book-related innovation changed reading forever. Letters on the page, a steady stream that mimicked the continuous sound of speech, was physically clumped into words, marked by spaces. Whereas reading had always been a social activity, sounding out the phonemes aloud to decipher their meaning, the word space allowed readers to scan the text silently.

Reading became a solitary pursuit, its ingestion so automatic that a deep empathy formed between the reader and the author. As the reader's concentration strengthened, the author could, in turn, count on that attention span and risk writing more complex ideas. Books shielded the mind from distraction, and the reader's thinking

Image: Partial map of the Internet



could lean on the scaffold of the text to sustain a single line of thought for longer. Readers developed a capacity for deep attention that had been rare in the history of thinking.

Carr contends that hyperfocus is not our natural state – it isn't evolutionarily adaptive to filter out environmental cues for hours at a time when predators lurk nearby. But when that talent was fostered by the book, complexity of argument followed, extending to science, political structures, and beyond.

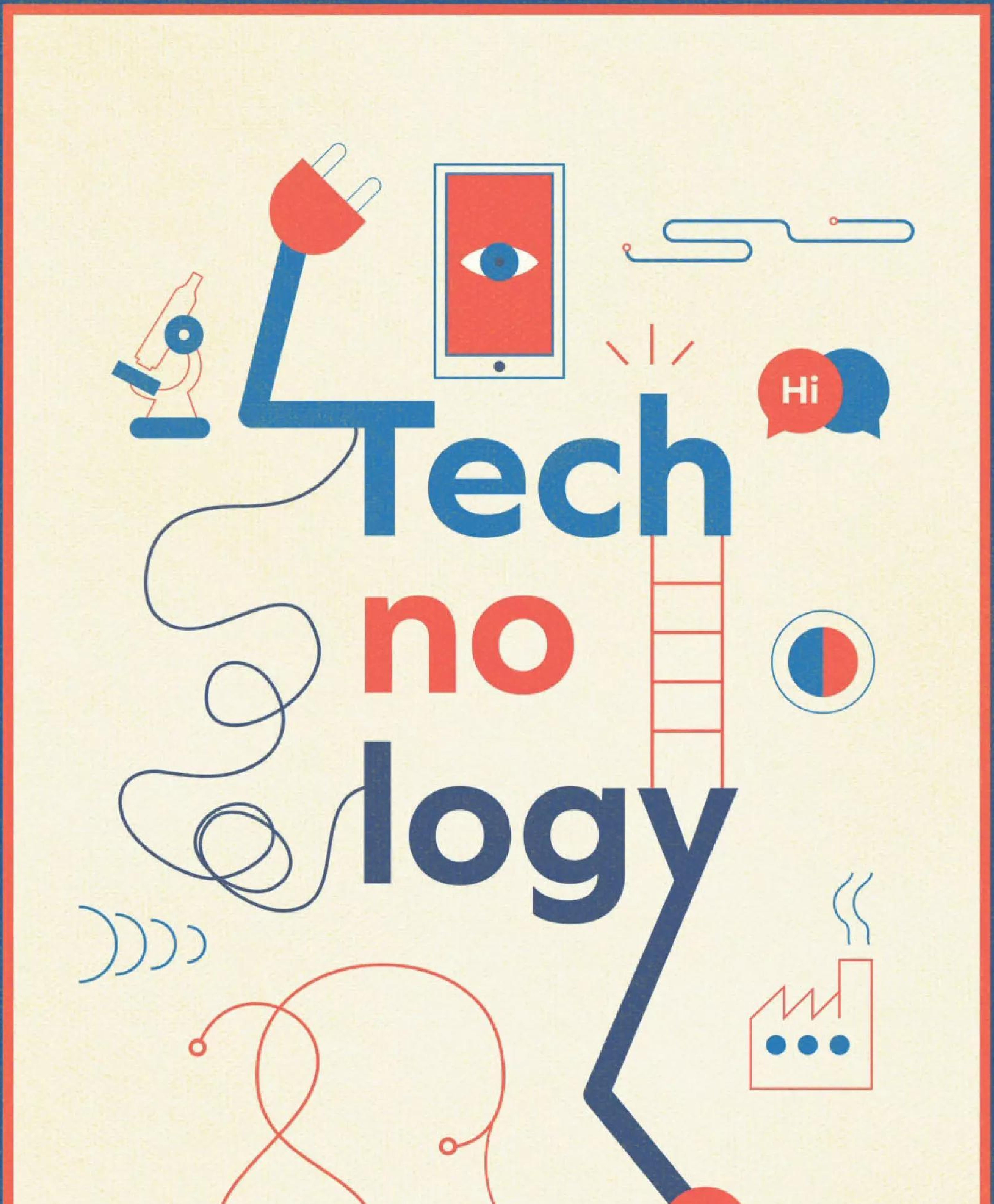
If a book's fundamental nature is contemplative and empathetic, the Internet's is precisely the opposite. The same hyperlinks that layer related pieces of information into a powerful research tool also erode our ability to absorb that information. In studies of online reading in which subjects read passages with varying numbers of embedded links, the more richly-hyperlinked passages led to lower comprehension, even when subjects did not click on any of the links. Each highlighted link is a tax on working memory. The reader must decide each time whether to venture blindly into another, potentially more diverting webpage.

The problem is that periodic interruption overrides broad, conceptual thought because it prevents the brain from weaving information from short-term memory into the rich web of associations that comprise our long-term memories. Nothing sticks. Potentially interesting knowledge passes inertly through our lightest processing without spurring deep thought. Nor does it have time to connect with our unique past experiences – the content that makes our thinking singular and original. Without sustained attention, we fail to feed our personalities, and so they atrophy in isolation from the world.

The brain is a wonderfully adaptable organ, eager to please the world in which it finds itself. The skills we practise become easier, and those we neglect become more difficult. The mental discipline of critical thinking, reflection, and introspection – some would say the more interesting ways of thought – can take years to develop. It has always been a rare ability in humans, and with an interruption every couple of minutes even those few with the aptitude for deep thought are less likely to come into their skills.

In Carr's experience, however, there is hope for the web-addled mind. His own inability to read for more than a couple of pages drove him to move to the Colorado mountains, to a home with a spotty Internet connection.

"For months, my synapses howled for their net fix," he writes. But slowly, out of the silence emerged a familiar thrill: "Disused circuits were springing back to life." Carr found himself writing for hours and reading dense academic papers without pause. In the crisp air of the mountains, "my brain could breathe again." N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Technology

noun
/tɛkˈnɒlədʒi/

1. The application of scientific knowledge for practical purposes, especially in industry;

2. Machinery and devices developed from scientific knowledge;

3. The branch of knowledge dealing with engineering or applied sciences.

Origin:
Early 17th century: from Greek *tekhnologia* ‘systematic treatment’, from *tekhne* (art, craft) + *-logia* (denoting a subject of study or interest).

Source:
Oxford English Dictionary

Photo: Ian Scott

Scuba diving in the infosphere

Interview by Zan Boag

Luciano Floridi is Professor of Philosophy and Ethics of Information at the University of Oxford, where he is the Director of Research of the Oxford Internet Institute, Distinguished Research Fellow of the Uehiro Centre for Practical Ethics, and Research Associate and Fellow in Information Policy of the Department of Computer Science. Outside Oxford, he is Distinguished Scholar in Residence of the Department of Economics, American University, Washington D.C. His most recent book is *The Fourth Revolution – How the Infosphere is Reshaping Human Reality*.

Technology in various forms has been a part of human life for some time now, but, as philosophers such as Heidegger argue, recently there has been a profound change in the nature of technology itself. What's so different about current technologies?

What is different is that it is no longer just a matter of interacting with the world by other means: a wheel rather than pushing stuff, or an engine rather than a horse. We have this new environment where we are spending more and more time – a digital environment, where agency is most successful because the technologies that we have are meant to interact successfully in a digital environment. Think of a fish in a swimming pool or in a lake. Well, we are kind of scuba diving now in the infosphere, whereas the artificial agents that we have, those are the fish – they live within an environment that is their environment. The digital interacting with the digital – software, databases, big data, algorithms, you name it – they are the natives, they are the locals. We are being pushed into an environment where we are scuba diving. You can't start imagining what it means for an artificial agent to interact with something that is made of its own same stuff. What an algorithm does to data is inconceivable for a human being that is a totally analogue biological entity. So one, they're building a new environment and we're guests in this new environment; second, all of a sudden, because they're changing how we understand the world, how we conceptualise our reality, how we conceptualise ourselves, how we interact with the world, and how we interact among ourselves – those four things – surely that represents a huge transformation in our philosophical understanding. The result is that we are entering into what I like to consider a new chapter in the history of philosophy… Out of all this, why does digital technology make a difference as opposed to the engine, or the fridge, or the wheel? Well, this builds on the environment and transforms all of the interactions we have among ourselves with our environment, and how we conceptualise ourselves and our environment. That's the foundation of any way of looking at the world, and that escalates into doing new philosophy. I'm not terribly keen on selling the philosophy of information as the *only* philosophy. If you know enough about the history of philosophy, you know that one day there will be something else. But today, it is the philosophy of our time, for our time. And we have pressing problems that we need to understand, and possibly solve.

What are the most significant positive and negative aspects of this 'fourth revolution', as you call it?

In terms of positive aspects, there is a sense of liberation and empowerment – at least in the 1990s with the honeymoon with the Internet we were enjoying it. You can be someone else, you can interact with people you could never dream of, you can do more with less, we can actually

Luciano Floridi

Photo: Tim Muntinga

help the environment a lot. I mean it is a gambit because of course all we do costs energy, but thanks to the Internet and the Internet of things, and so on, we can do much better and more with our resources.

So it's possible for us to do better, but whether we do this is another matter…

It's possible… but if you think of how we entertain ourselves, our education, how we can do politics, how we can relate to conflicts, they are all positive stories that we can tell in all this from whatever revolution you want to pick up in the last ten years, to any wonderful communication that we've been able to implement, and so on. But of course, the honeymoon has kind of come to an end and we have grown up a little bit, and growing up has shown the limits of all of this. Things we could have done, or not done, or done differently. So back to the concrete examples… technologies these days they polarise a lot, they transform – search engines don't make us stupid, but it does make our society more polarised. The stupid become more stupid, and the intelligent become more intelligent. It's like the rich become richer, and the poor become poorer. And that polarisation that is part of the technological development – that is a sad outcome which we could have prevented, we can still redress, but about which we're not doing enough. That's perhaps one of the problems that I find most challenging. The other one is the transformation of the Internet into a control, monitoring, spying, surveillance tool – that's kind of sad – and then the transformation of these wonderful technologies into technologies of mass distraction. We use them mostly to play, put cats on social media, chit chat with someone. Shame on us, to be honest, for having this wonderful stuff and that's all we do.

There are very few whose lives haven't been affected by digital technologies – not just in terms of distraction and entertainment, but also because of the sheer volume of information available. You write that every day, "enough data are being created to fill all US libraries eight times over," that we're in "the age of the zettabyte." What effect is this onslaught of information having on the average person?

It makes the environment in which we move an environment where only survival skills count. Once you are submerged by this enormous amount of data, information of all kinds, sources grabbing your attention – because that's what they're all about, they want a piece of your time and attention for them – once that pulling of your attention is constantly there, then we know that only those who can survive that kind of temptation will move forward. Most people will be tempted, will spend three hours on social media and wake up and say, "Wait, what, the whole Sunday morning went." So I know there's a lot of emphasis on this, "Oh my god, there's information about so many things, there's so much noise, it's confusing," and I think it's a problem, but it's not the main problem. It's a typical research-oriented epistemological view about the tsunami of information, but most of this data is not about science and knowledge, it's about trivialities, trillions of pictures that people put online, or videos of the last band they saw.

But for a moment forget about the epistemological side and think about the social side – every item there is calling for your attention. It's a crying baby. And you have trillions of crying babies. That is distracting to say the least. So, do I take care of the last video a friend sent me, or the holiday photos, or what my mum put there when she was talking to her friend? That distraction has got almost nothing to do with science and epistemology but is actually a social amount of information that is distracting us, and that seems to me the fundamental problem that we face. Unless you can fight it, but very few people can.

It's like food. We have so much food around us that it's very hard to be on a diet. And it's not because you want to be an athlete, or super-fit, you just know that if you keep eating all that junk, well, it's going to kill you. And it's the same with all this information out there – and every bit is calling for our attention. Every chocolate bar is calling, "me, me, me." Most of it is junk, and even of the stuff that isn't junk, there's just too much. Even of the best quality food – you can really have a hard time if you eat too much of the best possible food. I don't think it's so much about junky data, but what we need to realise is that there's an enormous amount of good information out there that we just have to give up. And that is the first time in the history of humanity we've had to do that.

If you put all these things together like dot points on a picture: mass distraction, attention being pulled, a society that likes to use the Internet also for monitoring and surveillance – these are all connected.

With the creation of virtual identities, the use of avatars, the 'safety' of the screen between them and others, people behave differently online than they would face-to-face. What has this development meant for relationships and interaction in general between humans? What are the problems we face with this shift? Are there any benefits?

I think there are some benefits. Going back to the good and bad things about the Internet: the benefit is that we have an extra opportunity to construct our identity. And that's really priceless. If you think of the constraints that you may have in a small village like the one in which I live – there are 500 people – it's hard to present yourself any differently than what they think you are, and that's the end of the story. They know you, they have a view about you, and that's you. Online, there is a little bit more scope. Of course, there are skills we have to learn, opportunities that we still don't take full advantage of, but at least the space is more malleable, so there's a sense in which you can be a little bit more in charge of your identity, and this includes the people that you want to meet. I mean, you want to join a group in New Zealand or in Canada that is keen on that particular band, and you can do it. I remember the frustration of being in a small place in the middle of nowhere and thinking, "I'm the only one interested in this stuff." So that's the wonderful thing in terms of the malleable nature of this.

There's also more space. If you think of space as almost like a physical thing, if people are too close to each other then there's friction and elbows touching each other. With the online world, well, there's as much space as you want.

But is there something missing when there isn't that physical interaction, the fragility of being next to someone else – do we lose that with online interaction?

We're losing one side of that. Because we don't have the physical experience of interacting with someone online, say with social media – it's not this kind of interaction where I can see your face, whether you're smiling, moving your hands; it's a very sensory-deprived context in which people are interacting. And because of that, we have to have a lot of other clues which we are not yet attuned to… Yes, we are losing the feeling of being next to the other person, of being in the same room, but at the same time maybe we will develop a sense of being in this online environment where other clues make the difference. I don't want to be too trivial, but emoticons go in that direction. There's a need for being a little more present than a few lines or a picture.

I'd like to move on to memory. In this edition, philosopher Patrick Stokes – your former colleague at Hartfordshire – writes about how we're 'forgetting how to forget' as we increasingly outsource our memory to our phones and computers – storing and sharing every moment. As Kierkegaard puts it, "we're remembering the experience while we're still having it." Do you think this is a concern, or are we simply finding new ways of communicating and recording, a different way of being?

This problem raises several issues that are crucial – there are so many things here that are of absolute fundamental philosophical value. The first thing is a misunderstanding about ICT – digital technologies – we'll call them technologies of memory, but they actually wipe our memory. What they do is they are constantly presenting memory as an over-extended eternal present. That's typical of search engines. In the past, you would have some of the memories sediment into blocks and it's important to stress that you really would have the memories, but you would not be recalling those memories. That's a definition I provid-

Luciano Floridi

ed recently of 'closure'. Closure is not forgetting – it's remembering without recalling. You don't want to forget what happened, on the contrary history needs to be remembered. But at the same time you don't want to refresh that memory all the time because otherwise you never move forward. Say two friends who have had a fight, or you and your spouse, something didn't go well, but we put it in the archive. It's not cleaning or erasing things...

These technologies, by nature, they constantly regurgitate everything we have, all on one single front page.

Therefore the art of remembering, forgetting, recalling, closure, all those things that we skilfully developed over millennia have been completely disrupted. Think of personal identity and how much memory is actually *you* and *me*. Classic thought experiment: I wake up tomorrow morning and I have zero memory of any kind. I don't know how to play squash, I don't know how to speak English, I don't even know my name, *nada*. Blank slate. Am I still me? We can spend an endless amount of time discussing it, but there is a commonsense idea that you have lost yourself.

Let's piece all this together… there's a sense in which we are our memories, and then we develop technologies which handle memories. These are technologies that are handling personal identities, that's what it is. So this adds to the previous strand of the conversation 20 minutes ago – why this is making such a difference to our lives as opposed to the engine. Well, an engine doesn't change me. It's not supposed to handle my personal identity – well, some people do identify with their car, poor them. These technologies are meant to handle and transform and process your memories. Therefore these technologies are handling your personal identity. You've got to be careful about how you handle these memories… You've got control over information, you've got control over personal identity.

Luciano Floridi

Have we lost something fundamental by being as reliant on technology as we are today. Are we missing out on life as we're fiddling with the dials on our pieces of technology?

You might have guessed from what I have said and what I write that I tend to be on the Pollyanna optimistic side of things. What we're missing is an opportunity. The online-offline forces interacting with each other, they could make each other a better experience, a richer experience, we could add new sides, new aspects to our lives – or it could actually collapse into each other and constrain and limit our lives. I think to some extent, it's a polarisation. For the majority of people, it's a collapse. I have the impression that for many people the digital and the analogue – the online and the offline – are kind of a supernova collapsing into a smaller and smaller and less and less rich world of experience. But for some other people – and maybe it's a minority, I don't know, they are actually expanding. You can do more, you can enjoy life in a variety of different ways, and that is to some extent up to the individuals and also up to our society and our education.

What you want to have is where you have the two options where the online and the offline are collaborating to make things better. This is moving towards a mature information society where we're not just chasing the next app or the new start-up, but we're thinking about the human project we want to build. That's something that I find highly disappointing at the moment – there is no conversation going on about this. Not much, at least.

That leads me to a point that you raised in another interview – you said that, "We are, literally, on the brink of making this planet uninhabitable. Maybe it's time for a change." What form should that change take? What is to be done?

We know that this is a problem. Anyone who thinks that we have more pressing problems than each other's intolerance and the destruction that we are causing to the environment, they should get out of their office more often. Fundamentally, it's how much we're destroying the environment and how much we're destroying each other – that is the challenge we have. And I see this as two sides of the same problem: vandalism. Vandalism which is called 'terrorism' in one case, and 'environmental destruction' in the other case. But it's about destruction. With this vandalism, we have a good chance – but it's getting late – of reversing what we're doing at the moment and technologies can really help a lot with this. They can help essentially by providing a much more intelligent way of living on this planet. Now I know that this sounds a bit utopian, but if you think of how technologies can decrease our consumption and make us use whatever we consume way more intelligently – basically, do more with less. Technologies can be a fundamental player in all this. But the trouble is that we don't have enough time, so even on the vandal/terrorist side, we're using technologies in the wrong way, we're using them for surveillance, to check on people, whereas we could actually use them to talk to each other.

And that's the only way forward. Sooner or later we're going to sit at that table – the question is: how much pain is it going to take to get there? If it's 100 years, then that's 100 years of pain that we're going to inflict on each other, bombing this, bombing that, pointlessly because at the end of the day we will sit at that table. Northern Ireland, Israel and Palestine, any other place. So ultimately, it seems to me that technology can play a good role in all this – but it is not at the moment playing that role. We are missing the opportunities so I'm not terribly optimistic about what we are actually doing, but in terms of what we could

The 4 Technological Revolution

be doing, well, the opportunity is there. These technologies are 'green' in the sense that they are anti-vandalism – they can help the environment, and they can help society. What I find missing in all this recipe is the political will.

Where will the change come from? Who is going to instigate the change?

If we had had this conversation a couple of months ago I would have said: we need to understand how politics can make a difference in our society so that vandalism of these two kinds can be withstood and we can move forward to a better world socially and environmentally. Today, I have changed my mind. Politics will only be the vehicle – the tool – what we need is to change our ethics. Recently when I was in Brussels, after a meeting with the European parliament, someone asked me a blunt question: "Give me one sentence, what should we do?" And under pressure I said, "Pain now." We as a society, as long as we keep buying that T-shirt that costs so little, that piece of chicken that costs so little – yes it's good for my pocket, but the environment is going to collapse.

The question is, how does this 'pain' start? Does it have to be top-down?

That's why I'm not optimistic about what we're going to do. If you look at human history, big changes have happened after disasters occurred. We didn't decide to regulate nuclear weapons until two had been exploded, and the Cold War, and so on. So if history teaches us that kind of lesson, we need to go through a disaster before finally we wake up and say, "You know what, we need to change course." What we're doing at the moment is buying time. From the environment to the terrorist problems, the social and environmental issues, we're buying time. And that's where I'm a bit pessimistic – we don't have time. Contrary to the past, to past crises – although the nuclear crisis was as close as you could get to not having time – especially with the environment, if we make a mess as we do at the moment, there will be a point of no return.

In theory, in an ideal world, change would have to be bottom-up. It has to be bottom-up. I don't see this coming from a few enlightened people in governments. It has to be the whole world, the whole population, that says, "Enough is enough, we have to change." Which means better distribution of resources, higher taxes because what we pay is insufficient for what we are consuming. That T-shirt cannot cost that little without someone somewhere suffering. ◼

Luciano Floridi

T

Technological progress has merely provided us with more efficient means for going backwards.

Aldous Huxley

Technology… is a queer thing. It brings you great gifts with one hand, and it stabs you in the back with the other.

C. P. Snow

E

We live in a society exquisitely dependent on science and technology, in which hardly anyone knows anything about science and technology.

Carl Sagan

It is questionable if all the mechanical inventions yet made have lightened the day's toil of any human being.

John Stuart Mill

Man has turned his back on silence. Day after day he invents machines and devices that increase noise and distract humanity from the essence of life, contemplation, meditation.

Jean Arp

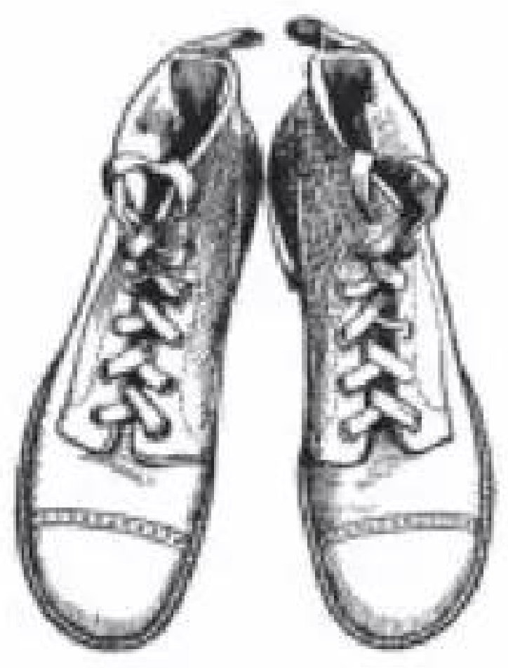
The factory of the future will have only two employees, a man and a dog. The man will be there to feed the dog. The dog will be there to keep the man from touching the equipment.

Warren G. Bennis

C

Whoever concerns himself with big technology, either to push it forward or to stop it, is gambling in human lives.

Freeman Dyson



You cannot endow even the best machine with initiative; the jolliest steam-roller will not plant flowers.

Walter Lippmann

H

What has made the animal, man, degenerate into a machine?

Wilhelm Reich

The machine does not isolate man from the great problems of nature but plunges him more deeply into them.

Antoine de Saint-Exupéry

N

O

In its essence, technology is something that man does not control.

Martin Heidegger

Inventors and geniuses have almost always been looked on as no better than fools at the beginning of their career, and very frequently at the end of it also.

Fyodor Dostoyevsky

L

Why does this magnificent applied science which saves work and makes life easier bring us so little happiness? The simple answer runs: Because we have not yet learned to make sensible use of it.

Albert Einstein

All technologies should be assumed guilty until proven innocent.

Jerry Mander

Technology presumes there's just one right way to do things and there never is.

Robert M. Pirsig

O

If there is technological advance without social advance, there is, almost automatically, an increase in human misery, in impoverishment.

Michael Harrington

NORTHERN
MUTUAL
5
TELEGRAPH
CO.

Our inventions are wont to be pretty toys, which distract our attention from serious things. They are but improved means to an unimproved end.

Henry David Thoreau

There is unquestionably a contradiction between an efficient technological machine and the flowering of human nature, of the human personality.

Arthur Miller

G

Is it a fact, or have I dreamt it – that, by means of electricity, the world of matter has become a great nerve, vibrating thousands of miles in a breathless point of time?

Nathaniel Hawthorne

We are stuck with technology when what we really want is just stuff that works.

Douglas Adams

Y

The art of Amistics

by Tom Chatfield

In his most recent novel, *Seveneves*, sci-fi author Neal Stephenson coins an intriguing term: "Amistics".

Amistics describes "the choices that different cultures made as to which technologies they would, and would not, make part of their lives." Derived from the Amish principle of the selective use of technology, the example Stephenson's novel has in mind is not – as you might expect – weapons or artificial intelligence. Instead, his imagined future selects an increasingly ubiquitous contemporary technology for exclusion: "high-frequency social media tools".

Why? Because of social media's capacity to "get the better of [the] higher faculties" by bombarding human brains with emotive appeals, distractions, and short-term enticements. In the future envisaged by *Seveneves*, these psychological prods and pokes precipitate a near-terminal crisis within a society already traumatised by terrible events. Subsequently, "any efforts made by modern consumer-goods manufacturers to produce the kinds of devices and apps that had disordered the brain [like high-frequency social media] were met with… instinctive pushback."

Amistics, then, is a belated art: the fruit of bitter experience and cries of "never again!" It's also a neat provocation, and a way in to a troubling set of questions. What does it mean to use technology selectively? How far can whole societies determine which technologies they use – if at all – rather than allowing technology to determine their history?

Amish communities themselves vary in what they permit. There are around 40 different Amish subgroups, all of whom practice selective use rather than outright rejection, evaluating whether a new technology would improve their way of life in the light of their (strongly Christian) values. Television, home computing, and car ownership are banned, together with mains electricity. Some battery-powered devices are allowed, as are home electrical generation and solar power in some settlements. Modern medicine is selectively applied. Most groups allow members to hire vehicles for long-distance travel and business. Non-electric adaptations of other goods are also occasionally used, such as refrigerators powered by kerosene.

Testing technologies for their effect is a formal process in Amish societies. Someone brings a new piece of technology to the community leaders; the community leaders appoint others to test it out; those testing the technology are themselves monitored while using it; and everyone then reports back. If no sufficiently compelling benefit is found, the community does not adopt it. Young Amish are allowed to experiment with technological modernity – cars, media, pop culture – before deciding when they enter adulthood whether to stay and conform, or leave. It's archaic, patriarchal, and surprisingly robust; Amish numbers continue to grow across America.

Biblical literalism is hardly a practical global approach to technology, but its emphasis on a values-led approach is intriguing. In their own way, the Amish practice an undervalued discipline: critical thinking about technology. More often, modern attitudes to technology are dominated by what psychologist Paul Slovic christened the "affect heuristic" – in which, in the absence of evidence or expertise, a difficult

Amish technological practices are directed against two vices: vanity and the pursuit of material wealth.

judgement is referred to the emotions. As Nobel laureate Daniel Kahneman explains it, "the affect heuristic simplifies our lives by creating a world that is much tidier than reality. Good technologies have few costs in the imaginary world we inhabit, bad technologies have no benefits, and all decisions are easy."

Can we hope to do better than giving vent to our feelings? One of the problems with any significant technological innovation is that its consequences are inherently unforeseeable. Belatedness comes with the territory. What will remain resolutely consistent and unperfected within any technological situation, however, is human nature itself – and in this regard the Amish have a trick or two to teach.

Amish technological practices are directed against two vices above all: vanity and the pursuit of material wealth. If some farmers are allowed to automate their labour beyond a certain point, the reasoning goes, others will also need to do so to keep up – or those with access to better machinery will gain land, power, and wealth at the expense of those who opt out. Equality can only be ensured by levelling the playing field, much as vanity is to be held at bay by limiting technologies like photography and image reproduction.

Photography and vanity may or may not be entwined (flicking through certain glossy magazines certainly suggests a correlation), but the Amish are on to something when it comes to competition. If you're looking for the single strongest reason why technological determinism works as a model of history – why, in the long term, technological developments seem to determine what happens to us as a species – competition is the decisive factor.

Imagine that you're part of an early tribal society whose most advanced technology is the flint tool, and you come up against a rival able to make bronze weapons. Unless you too learn the secret of bronze-working – or, better still, forging steel – you are at their mercy. They can extract unfavourable trading terms or take your territory, if they so choose. Even if they don't choose to press their advantage, you're still only safe until the next and better-armed lot come along.

Technology isn't the only factor in civilisational success, but when it comes to long-term rivalries it tends to be decisive. Once your enemy has machine guns, cavalry charges cease to be an option. Once they have drones, you need bigger and better drones (or hackers, or killer autonomous robots). Once one nation has nuclear weapons, the only deterrent big and bad enough to keep others in the game is more nukes (or careful strategic alliances).

The same applies to the world of business. If you work in financial services and a rival trading operation buys the latest in high-frequency automation, you'll need the same just to keep up – and something better yet to gain an edge. You're welcome to opt out at any time, but there'll always be another to take your place. Reflection is a luxury affordable only after the event; regulation more often than not a species of mitigation drawn up by winners' clubs.

Thus ends the determinist's tale, in which technological and human progress are largely synonymous. Protests to the contrary are either nostalgia or denial.

Except, I would argue, it's determinism that's in denial of the facts – and doesn't realise the good part of the story begins only where it leaves off. Progress towards what, and at what cost? Progress in which areas and to whose gain? Unless we can turn to the cumulative insights of other fields – to philosophy, science, politics, and art; to history, psychology, aesthetics, and fiction – we can't begin to debate such questions. Indeed, we can't debate anything. We've reduced ourselves to the state of automata, and in doing so have failed to do justice to either us or our creations.

The alternative? Dispense with any take on 'technology' as an abstract whole, distinct from the societies through which it is interlaced. Embrace the fact that humans and their tools – from flint knives to alphabets to zettabytes of placeless data – are locked in an unending negotiation. Look to what we do, and how and why, not just what we do it with.

As another science fiction author, William Gibson, famously declared, "the future is already here – it's just not very evenly distributed." The corollary is that if you look hard and honestly enough, you'll see a shadow of your future flickering elsewhere in the present. What are people actually doing, today, with tools old and new? What are the balances to be borne in mind – the effects of innovation upon values worth chasing? These are questions worth answering, all the more so because no answers will ever be final.

When it comes to technology, the greatest peril of all is that we abandon critical thinking in a puff of determinism; that, as Stephenson's fictional society did to its cost, we switch off our higher faculties in a blaze of precision-engineered titillation.

Our responsibility is not to some abstract vision of human potential – whether enhanced by ultimate technology, or denuded of it entirely. It is to each other, as we can best understand our circumstances: compromised, enmeshed in history, bound by ties we have not chosen. To become more free, for us, is not to pretend that the mirrors our machines hold up show anything entirely new. It is to look more carefully at how we live, with them and without them, and hope to become less deceived.

When it comes to technology, the greatest peril of all is that we abandon critical thinking in a puff of determinism.

The art of Amistics

NASA
GM

Photo: Robert Markowitz – NASA

Technology

The Polymath

TERMS OF THE MACHINE

Ivan Illich
1926–2002

Machines which ape people are tending to encroach on every aspect of people's lives, and such machines force people to behave like machines. The new electronic devices do indeed have the power to force people to 'communicate' with them and with each other on the terms of the machine. Whatever structurally does not fit the logic of machines is effectively filtered from a culture dominated by their use… The machine-like behaviour of people chained to electronics constitutes a degradation of their well-being and of their dignity which, for most people in the long run, becomes intolerable. Observations of the sickening effect of programmed environments show that people in them become indolent, impotent, narcissistic, and apolitical. The political process breaks down, because people cease to be able to govern themselves; they demand to be managed.

The Writer

FIENDISH THREATS

Mary Shelley
1797–1851

"Had I right, for my own benefit, to inflict this curse upon everlasting generations? I had before been moved by the sophisms of the being I had created; I had been struck senseless by his fiendish threats; but now, for the first time, the wickedness of my promise burst upon me; I shuddered to think that future ages might curse me as their pest, whose selfishness had not hesitated to buy its own peace at the price, perhaps, of the existence of the whole human race."
Dr Frankenstein

The Astronomer

WHITE-COATED LOONIES

Carl Sagan
1934–1996

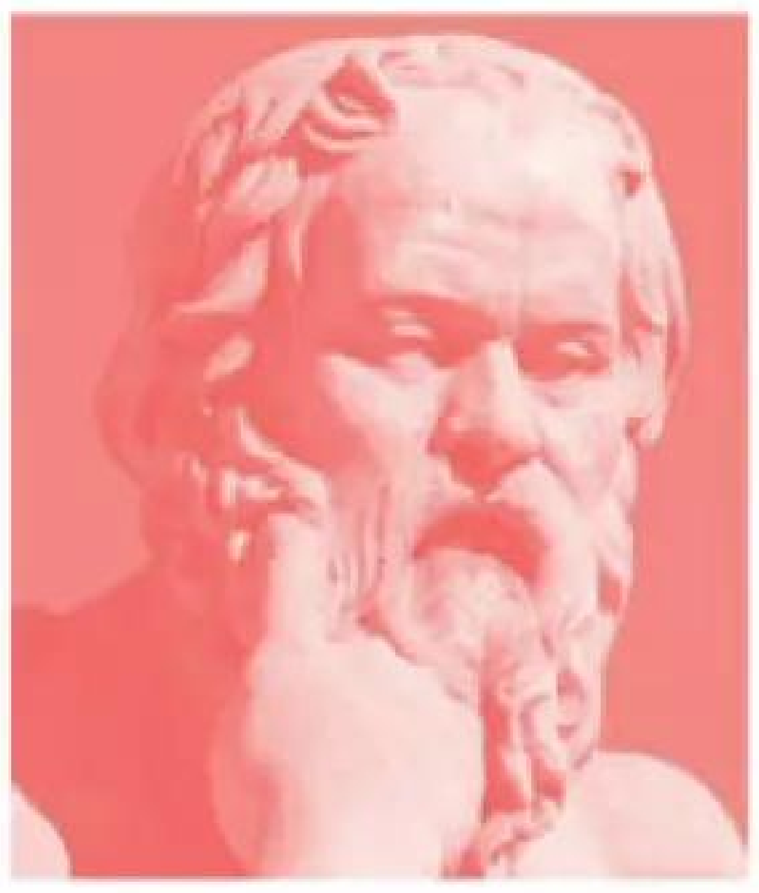
I know that science and technology are not just cornucopias pouring good deeds out into the world. Scientists not only conceived nuclear weapons; they also took political leaders by the lapels, arguing that their nation – whichever it happened to be – had to have one first… There's a reason people are nervous about science and technology. And so the image of the mad scientist haunts our world – from Dr Faust to Dr Frankenstein to Dr Strangelove to the white-coated loonies of Saturday morning children's television. (All this doesn't inspire budding scientists.) But there's no way back. We can't just conclude that science puts too much power into the hands of morally feeble technologists or corrupt, power-crazed politicians and decide to get rid of it.

What is technology? Is technological 'progress' inevitable? What part do machines play in the way we live our lives? Here are six eminent thinkers' views.

The Founder

THE SEMBLANCE OF TRUTH

Socrates
470–399 BCE



But when they came to letters, This, said Theuth, will make the Egyptians wiser and give them better memories; it is a specific both for the memory and for the wit. Thamus replied: O most ingenious Theuth, the parent or inventor of an art is not always the best judge of the utility or inutility of his own inventions to the users of them. And in this instance, you who are the father of letters, from a paternal love of your own children have been led to attribute to them a quality which they cannot have; for this discovery of yours will create forgetfulness in the learners' souls, because they will not use their memories; they will trust to the external written characters and not remember of themselves. The specific which you have discovered is an aid not to memory, but to reminiscence, and you give your disciples not truth, but only the semblance of truth; they will be hearers of many things and will have learned nothing; they will appear to be omniscient and will generally know nothing; they will be tiresome company, having the show of wisdom without the reality.

The Cultural Critic

INADEQUATE INFORMATION

Neil Postman
1931–2003

Because of what computers commonly do... With the exception of the electric light, there never has been a technology that better exemplifies Marshall McLuhan's aphorism "The medium is the message." The "message" of computer technology is comprehensive and domineering. The computer argues, to put it baldly, that the most serious problems confronting us at both personal and professional levels require technical solutions through fast access to information otherwise unavailable. This is... nonsense. Our most serious problems are not technical, nor do they arise from inadequate information. If a nuclear catastrophe occurs, it shall not be because of inadequate information. Where people are dying of starvation, it does not occur because of inadequate information. If families break up, children are mistreated, crime terrorises a city, education is impotent, it does not happen because of inadequate information. Mathematical equations, instantaneous communication, and vast quantities of information have nothing whatever to do with any of these problems. And the computer is useless in addressing them.

The Moral Philosopher

RULING OTHERS

Mary Midgely
1919–

'Cognition' cannot be 'translated into circuitry'. Learning and creativeness cannot be 'defined as specific portions of the cognitive machinery'. They cannot be because translating and defining are operations performed, not on the mean in any thinker's brain, but on language. Learning, knowing, and so forth are words to describe the relation of a thinking subject (as a whole) to the things he thinks and talks about. Defining these words is clarifying their proper use, so as to get rid of whatever ambiguities and confusions dog them. Since these words describe functions of the whole thinking subject, they cannot be used to describe changes in 'portions of the cognitive machinery' he uses to perform them. This would again be like saying that the carburettor had won the race, instead of the car of the driver. Carburettors do not even know how to enter races, let alone win them. Winners need carburettors, and thinkers (including neurologists) need brain cells.

Here comes the real digital revolution

by Robert W. McChesney

The Internet has transformed our economies, our culture and politics, and our very way of life to such an extent over the past four or five decades that we are by many accounts in the midst of a communication revolution on a par with the invention of writing or the printing press; perhaps speech itself. Arguably, it's that important. But what we have experienced to date is only the warm-up act.

In the summer of 2015 the CEO of one of the largest industrial corporations in the world gave a speech at an exclusive private dinner for the wealthy and powerful in Germany. In the question-and-answer period, the CEO was asked about the use of robots in manufacturing and whether they were a realistic prospect in the future. The CEO informed the audience that his company already had one fully automated factory, and had the technology in hand to immediately convert all of its factories worldwide to being fully automated. The major factor that deterred them from doing so was not economic – it made perfect economic sense to do so – but political: converting to fully automated factories would throw at least 40 per cent of their total workforce, much of it still based in Germany, into the unemployment lines. "If we did that," he said, "the middle class in Germany would burn." The audience was astounded, because the implication was that this was coming soon – very soon – and even one of the world's most powerful CEOs could not keep his finger in the dyke much longer.

An audience of computer scientists would not have been surprised – the science of robotics has exploded with revolutionary developments in the past few years and many more previously unimaginable breakthroughs are now on the immediate horizon. Consider the analysis of Gill A. Pratt, until 2015 the Program Director at the Pentagon's Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA), where he oversaw work on robotics. DARPA has been at the centre of technological innovation throughout the digital era. Pratt argues that humanity may be on the verge of experiencing something comparable in effect to the Cambrian Explosion, referring to the relatively brief period 540 million years ago when life underwent an astonishingly rapid diversification, including, arguably, the evolution of vision. It was crucial for the subsequent development of complex and intelligent life. Pratt outlined a series of related and complementary breakthroughs in robotics and computing that will make it possible for machines "to replicate the performance of many of the perceptual parts of the brain," including, fittingly enough, vision itself.

At the very least, Pratt observes, "the effects on economic output and human workers are certain to be profound." He refuses to predict when exactly this will occur, "as the timing

For those under the age of thirty, the labour market is hardly superior to that of the Great Depression.

of tipping points is hard to predict," but it is on its way.

The transformation of employment wrought by robots and digital communication is not restricted to manufacturing. Those who study the matter believe something in the order of one-half of existing jobs will be eliminated in the coming one or two decades, and that no sector will be immune to automation. In 2014 another prominent CEO announced at Davos that most traditional white-collar jobs were also on the digital chopping block. And no one foresees any new employment sectors opening up that are sufficient to swallow the displaced workers or the hundreds of millions of people entering the workforce across the planet. Not even close.

Even the prospect of ever-lower wages cannot compete with the gigantic promise of the new technologies. Based in China, the world's largest manufacturing firm – employing over one million workers – is among the largest purchasers of industrial robots. It is planning for a day in the not-too-distant future when it, too, will have fully automated factories.

These developments are going to pose direct and mortal challenges to both capitalism and democracy. It is not like US capitalism is well-positioned to receive a wave of automation; it is hardly firing on all cylinders. The system is mired in long-term stagnation with slow growth, unemployment, underemployment, trillions of dollars in savings incapable of locating profitable investments, declining real wages, and radically escalating inequality – all markers of our economic times. For those under the age of thirty, the labour market is hardly superior to that of the Great Depression. And to this we are now poised to introduce a revolutionary wave of automation that will aggravate all of these long-running tendencies, perhaps exponentially.

Barring reforms not yet visible or known, the system would appear to be evolving more into a decaying feudal order than providing the basis for an affluent society with social mobility. If no one has sufficient income to buy new products, then there is no incentive to invest for profit. Under stagnation, the revolutionary advances in technology are hardly a panacea; they only seem to promote ever-greater talk about the need to slash living standards and cut back on social services.

That this is a supreme irony – at the exact moment far less human labour is necessary to produce more than enough to satisfy human wants and needs, the system that fostered that abundance is incapable of adapting to it – has been understood by economists from Karl Marx and John Stuart Mill to Thorstein Veblen and John Maynard Keynes. They all understood that capitalism as we know it will eventually need to be superseded with a post-scarcity system that is built around the new economic reality.

As Keynes put it in 1930, humanity was only a century away from solving the "economic problem" that had defined the species from the beginning; it would no doubt bring about a period

of considerable turmoil and angst, but the eventual destination would be one of human bliss. Mill wrote elegantly about a "stationary state" society, where economic growth was unnecessary, commercialism would be reduced, human nature would evolve, and all people could develop their talents and faculties as only the wealthy few could do in the impoverished past. And Marx, of course, regarded it as the material basis for a genuinely free and egalitarian society – which would be impossible in a world of poverty.

The immediate place these tensions will play out is in the political realm, as citizens will demand political solutions to the great problems of stagnation, unemployment, underemployment, and poverty. As with capitalism, political democracy has hardly been experiencing a golden age of informed citizen participation and public service-minded leadership in recent years. The economic reality of extreme inequality and personal greed translates into increased corruption and cynicism in the political sphere, and that undermines effective self-government. The United States is an extreme example, with money-drenched campaigns and abysmally low voter turnouts – especially among the poor, the young, and the dispossessed. As the crisis deepens, however, people will return to the political realm, and it is an open question as to whether the system can respond with democratic and humane solutions. Those who greatly benefit from the status quo will likely battle against progressive change as if their lives depended on it. It could just as easily degenerate into propaganda, militarism, and tyranny. Everything rides on the outcome.

We are not in entirely uncharted historical territory. In the 1930s most of the nations in the capitalist world experienced widespread severe unemployment, and it appeared resistant to elimination by traditional policies. A new scourge emerged and proved victorious in several nations: fascism. This was the result of an unprecedented development: a mass movement against democracy. Fascism claimed democracy was ineffectual and outdated; it said there were 'solutions' to unemployment, solutions which invariably involved the role of militarism as the only legitimate form of government stimulus. All fascist movements invariably played upon racism and chauvinism of one form or another, depending on the nation, to gee up support. It ranks among the ugliest and most shameful developments in history, and we see it re-emerging as the crisis deepens, even in nations where the scourge of fascism made that notion unthinkable for generations.

In contrast to fascism, the great anti-fascist movements of the 1930s and 1940s produced a strong commitment to invigorating democratic institutions, ending militarism, and guaranteeing all people a secure standard of living as the bulwark against fascism and the only way for humanity to proceed. US President Franklin D. Roosevelt went as far as to argue we needed an "economic bill of rights" to end poverty and to be certain fascism would never return. It is a good place for us to begin the necessary discussion as we move toward the abyss. N

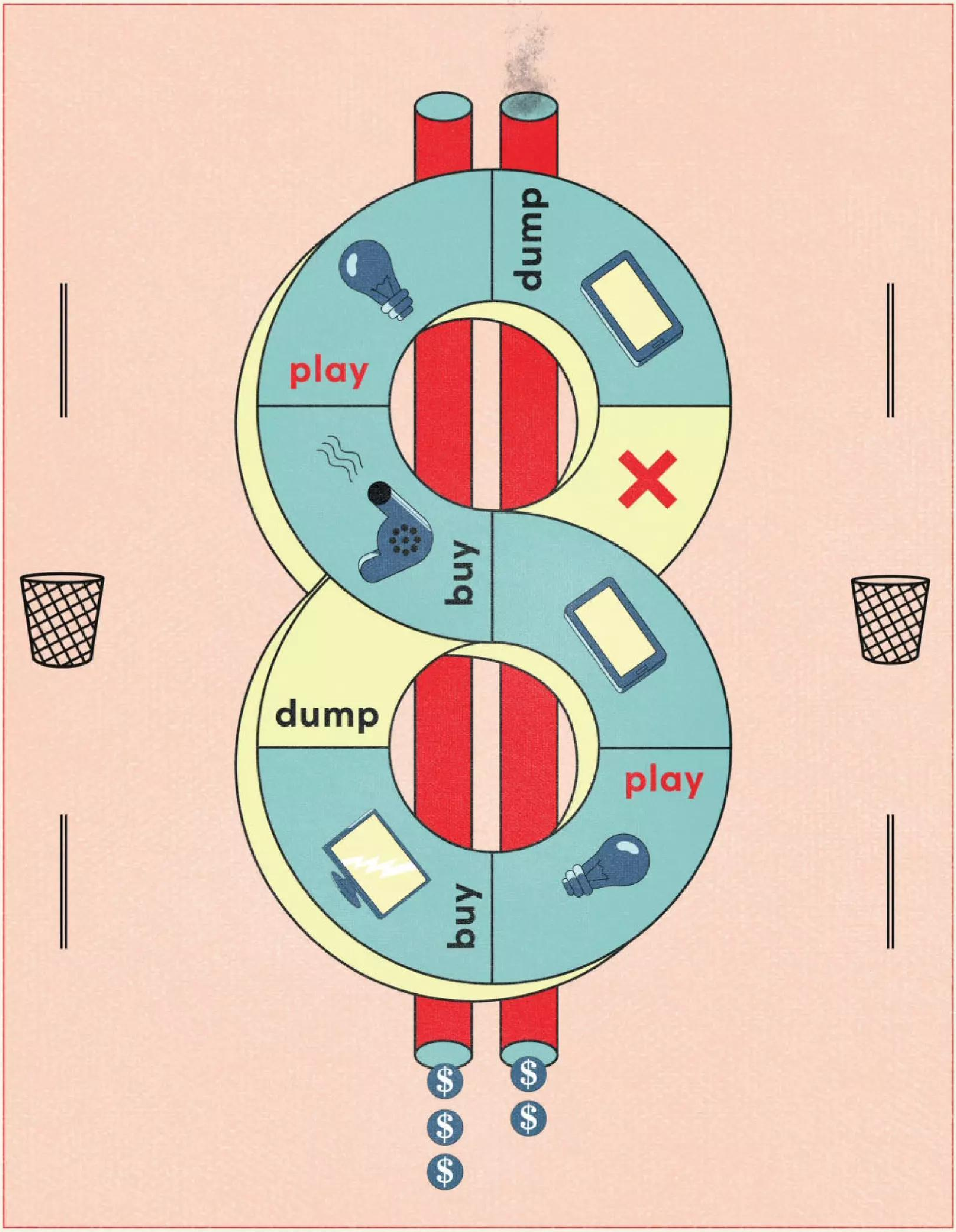
Those who greatly benefit from the status quo will likely battle against progressive change as if their lives depended on it.

Our contemporary culture, primed by population growth and driven by technology, has created problems of environmental degradation that directly affect all of our senses: noise, odours, and toxins which bring physical pain and suffering, and ugliness, barrenness, and homogeneity of experience which bring emotional and psychological suffering and emptiness. In short, we are jeopardising our human qualities by pursuing technology as an end rather than a means. Too often we have failed to ask two necessary questions: First, what human purpose will a given technology or development serve? Second, what human and environmental effects will it have?

US SENATE PUBLIC WORKS COMMITTEE,
report on water pollution bill, 7 August 1969.

Photo: Library of Congress

the game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# of obsolescence

Discarded objects

Discarded objects

by Nigel Warburton

My mother died earlier this year. In going through her possessions, amongst the school reports, the letters, and old photograph albums, I found my father's early pocket calculator – a Sharp Elsi Mini. A relic from the '70s, chunky brushed steel and plastic, with red light-emitting diodes, it had a heavy retro feeling in my hand. I was transported back to my early teenage years, when this machine represented the height of technology. It had been a gift from clients – a valuable one since it cost the equivalent of a laptop today. I remember as a child testing it to its limits: multiplying numbers until the eight place screen overflowed, which it signalled with a row of red dots; dividing 100 by 3 to see the 33.333333 stream across the screen; turning it upside down, to type in the magical number 0.7734 which in the simple font of the calculator read 'hello'. Now, its soft leather case was missing, and it sat at the bottom of a cupboard, no longer a valuable tool to work out expense accounts – just a discarded piece of junk from long ago.

I didn't expect it to still work. Over 40 years on, that would have been too much to ask – it's almost an antique. But I bought four AA batteries anyway and switched it on. A little red zero appeared on the screen. All four of its simple functions worked. I searched the Internet and discovered that whereas many early calculators drained batteries in no time, this particular one had been a breakthrough as it was relatively economical in its power use. So why, I wondered, was it at the bottom of a cupboard? Why had we as a family gone through so many cheaper calculators when we had a fully functioning machine in the house? At school I'd needed a scientific calculator to replace the log tables and slide rule I'd begun to master just as they became obsolete. But since then, I've only used a calculator to add, subtract, multiply, and divide.

Meanwhile, like many people, I have a drawer in which I keep a range of discarded smart phones, most of which had a life of two years or less and should really have been recycled. None of them could do what my current phone does; the cameras in particular seem incredibly primitive and the memories tiny by comparison. I'm no longer sure why I'm keeping them.

But my father's calculator does everything I need a calculator to do and has a more appealing design than any of the cheap plastic calculators available today. For me at least, it is not a piece of obsolete technology, and it has a personal history. Modern calculators are cheaper and no doubt more energy-efficient, but this one still does the job it was made for. Yet I wonder how many people still use such machines. Calculators don't get passed on between generations. They're throwaways and scarcely valued at all because the technology in them is so cheap. In a few years, they may, like slide rules, become almost completely obsolete as free-standing objects, as they are so easily integrated as apps on a smart phone or computer.

Children of my generation didn't anticipate that the objects we grew up with would be transitory: no one told us that technology would evolve at such a rate that the devices imagined in the science fiction of our childhood would be surpassed and made to look outdated by real innovations by the time we reached adulthood. When I went to the public library as a child, there was no talk of electronic books, or digital technology that would allow someone to carry the equivalent of a small library on a device in their handbag. Typewriters seemed here to stay in one form or another, as did pay phones and pagers. We recognised that technology would change gradually, of course, but didn't anticipate the accelerating pace of such change in our lifetimes.

The machines that we create are supposed to help us. They're functional objects, not merely decorative, and are to be judged on their success or failure at performing what they were designed to do. New technologies either perform old functions better than existing technologies, or serve new ends. But in a world that is changing so swiftly, businesses have a vested interest in hooking us into technology brands that need constant upgrading. We easily fall into the consumer traps that have been set for us, forever trying to fulfil new desires for new products, never quite achieving a state of contentment with the technology we have acquired because someone, somewhere has just come up with a faster, more-streamlined, more efficient machine than the one we bought last year. Meanwhile, as a result of this cycle of unfulfilled desires, we leave an ever-growing heap of discarded objects behind us, obsolete and semi-obsolete machines that once seemed to answer our needs, but now appear dated and clunky.

This might sound as if there is an easy way out: simply stick with something that works well enough and refuse to be seduced by technological novelty, no matter what it promises in terms of efficiency. But try holding on to old technology: it's just not that easy. True, a few idiosyncratic writers have, for example, continued to use their manual typewriters, but that forces them to stockpile ribbons and replacement parts, and to hunt down the few surviving typewriter-technicians when something goes wrong. A machine without a supply of parts and the people who know how to fit them can leave you high and dry. Like it or not, we are all caught up in the flow of new technologies, and opting out will only leave us isolated and shut out from the world our children inhabit.

In a world that is changing so swiftly, businesses have a vested interest in hooking us into technology brands that need constant upgrading.

So my father's calculator is really exceptional. It's a machine from another age that carries on working without requiring a service, and the only parts that ever have to be replaced are still easily available: standard batteries. What's more, I haven't acquired new mathematical needs, needs that this calculator can't meet; adding, subtracting, dividing, and multiplying are not functions that can be better performed by a newer machine – you either get the right answer or you don't. Unlike so many technological objects I use, this one has been around long enough to acquire some personal history for me. I remember my father's delight when he came home with this very calculator, how carefully we had to handle it because of its value, the now-lost snug leather zip-up case that it was kept in, exactly where it was stored in the cupboard under our newly-acquired and almost miraculous colour television.

Yet, I'm fairly sure that I'll stop using this calculator quite soon, even though its performance has, incongruously, passed the test of time, and even though it carries memories from my childhood. It's just easier to use the calculator on my smart phone or laptop than to stop what I'm doing and pick up a different piece of equipment. Digital technology is quickly applying its own form of Occam's Razor – the medieval injunction not to multiply entities beyond necessity – to the objects around me. Although the technological imperative has cluttered my life with the shells of once-useful objects, one promise that it seems to be fulfilling is to reduce the number of technological objects that I need to perform the functions that once required a portfolio of machines.

The pocket calculator, along with the pocket camera and the address book, will soon be consigned to history as separate physical objects; they're now just functions of another digital machine. I suppose that's progress. But when I look at my father's calculator, I still feel we might be losing something along the way.

Civilisation advances by extending the number of important operations which we can perform without thinking of them.

SHARP
ELSI MINI
hELLO

Alfred North Whitehead

Photo: Nigel Warburton

DOLCE&GABBANA

Part of the technical system

Interview by Zan Boag

Andrew Feenberg is Canada Research Chair in Philosophy of Technology in the School of Communication, Simon Fraser University, where he directs the Applied Communication and Technology Lab. Feenberg is the author of many books on technology, including *Alternative Modernity* and *(Re)inventing the Internet*. He is also recognised as an early innovator in the field of online education – in 1982 he led the TextWeaver Project under a grant from the US Department of Education.

What do you think are the most significant positive and negative aspects of the role of technology in contemporary society?

The most positive aspects are obvious: technology supports modern life, and all the good things about it. We have better medical care than people before, we have mobility in space, we have communication across the globe – there are all kinds of good things to be said about it. The bad things are also obvious: everyone knows about nuclear weapons, climate change, the terrible problems of developing countries, we could go on and on.

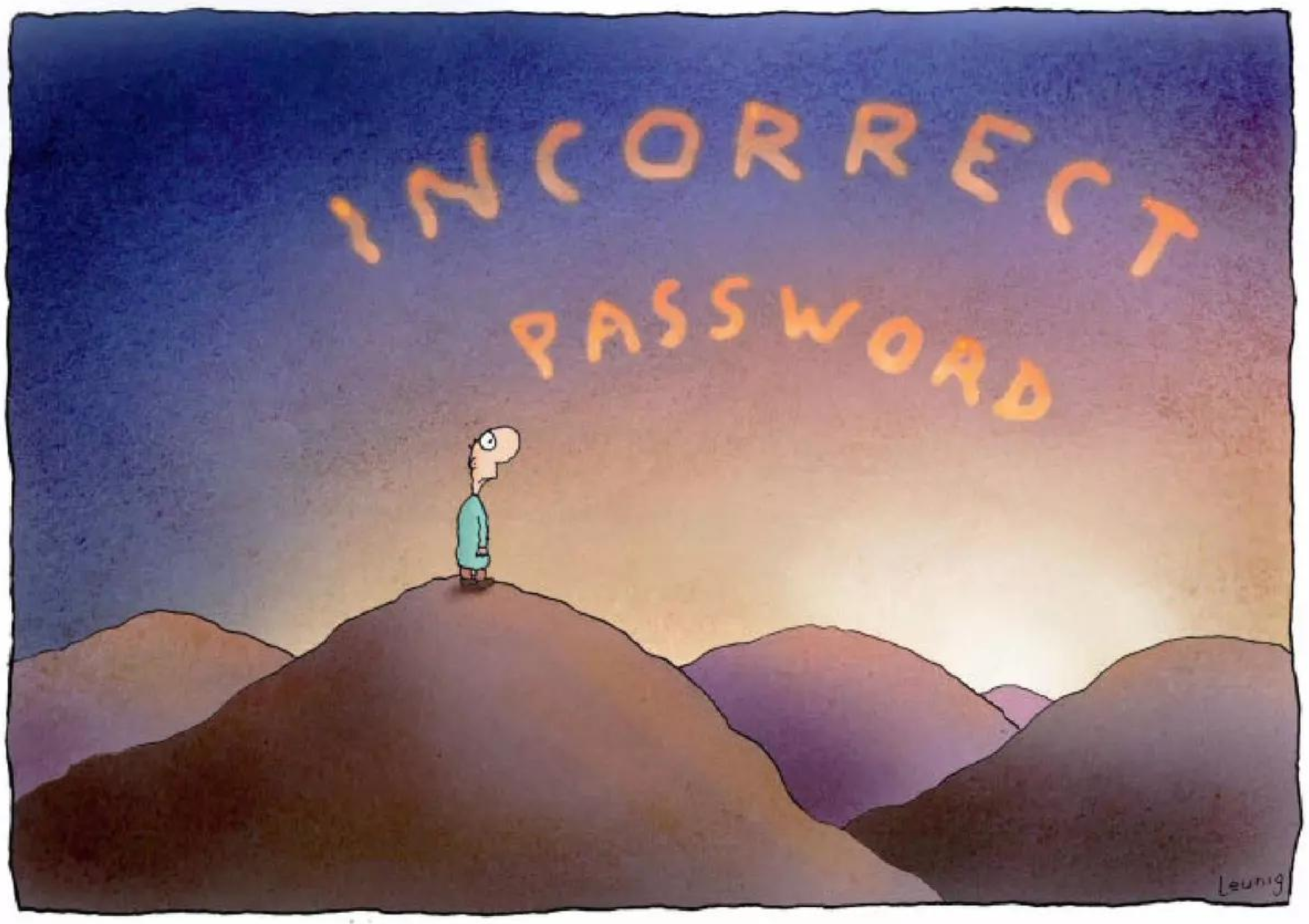
Are there particular groups who are worse off as a result of the increased use of technology?

Yes, of course. I think the greatest catastrophe of modernisation is suffered by poor farmers, who are impoverished by competition with industrial agriculture and forced off their land. This is an enormous human catastrophe. Instead of improving family farming with modern methods and help with transportation and communication, it has been pretty much destroyed without anyone thinking much about what to do with all the people whose livelihood depends on it. Life may be very hard in rural areas in poor countries, but you can't say it's a great improvement to be living in a slum where there's drug violence, no jobs, no clean water, and so on. This is the largest social group – you're talking about a billion people, at least – that has suffered the most from the current wave of modernisation.

Philosophers from Marcuse all the way back to Aristotle have something to say on technology. Heidegger argued that with contemporary technology there has been a profound change in the nature of technology itself. What do you think of this?

Heidegger makes a distinction between traditional technologies based on hand tools, and modern technology based on machines. He's got nothing against traditional technologies, but once vast, modern technological systems develop that encompass whole societies, people are absorbed into the technology – they become objects as well as subjects of the technologies and their behaviour and their lives are structured by the system. I think of this every time I take an aeroplane, which I do all too often. When you arrive at the airport, you become part of the technical system. You're told where to go, what to do, what to present, to whom. All of your behaviour is organised in advance by the system, and if you step out of line you can get in a lot of trouble. You're just another piece of equipment in the aviation system. Now it's true that the hostesses act like you're a person, and you can chat with them, but that's insignificant – the overall phenomenon is one of technical "enframing", as Heidegger calls it.

What concerns Heidegger is not so much that people lose their ability to do what they want once they're incorporated into the system – he thinks they lose their sense of themselves as 'human'.



I wonder what he would have to say about the current use of technology. It seems to have devolved into little more than a form of distraction for people…

You are thinking of video games and smartphones – yes, of course people have become absorbed in their gadgets to an unprecedented extent in the last few years. That is quite remarkable and certainly would not cause Heidegger to rethink his position; in fact it seems to confirm it. On the other hand this is what I would call an ambivalent phenomenon – the ability of people to use these instruments to communicate and organise their practical lives also has a positive character that shouldn't be dismissed. This is a problem that comes up in studying the Internet. It's true that on the Internet there's a lot of commercialism and surveillance and the bad guys seem to be sleeping well – once again. The Internet was supposed to liberate us, but it hasn't actually accomplished the mission. So, there's a lot of hype and counter-hype in the discussion of the Internet, but the reality is neither one extreme or the other.

It's early days, we're only in very early stages of the adoption of Internet technologies and other technologies.

Of course, we have no idea what the future of the Internet is – it's impossible to foresee. People still make use of the Internet for such a wide variety of purposes: everything from criminal activities to revolution to organising their international travels… how can anyone purport to know what this technology is about when you hear, for example, that migrant workers in France use the Internet to read bedtime stories to their children in Tunisia. What can you say? There's no way to sum up this system in a single message that would enable us to condemn it or praise it.

Are people behaving worse online than they would face-to-face?

If you read the comments after news articles, you get plenty of evidence that people are behaving badly, but how do you compare because you don't know what they're doing in their private life. This is just a public scene on which to act like an idiot.

What do you think of how our notion of personal identity has changed because of the ability to create virtual identities?

It's true, on computer networks you observe a new ability to manage identity. We've always had this possibility, for example through the way we dress, but now it can be managed in much more detail, much more reflexively, because identity is basically presented in writing, or if not in writing, in a video that can be edited. This enhanced ability to edit and manage identity goes along with the diminution of the risks of self-presentation. All those things that surround the honour and dignity of the person seem to have diminished in importance as the ability to manage identity has increased through anonymity. And it's also possible to withdraw from communication much more easily. So if someone insults you on the Internet, you can just cut the connection. You're not forced to stand there and look at them.

From what I've read of your work I can see that the idea of how technologies are shaping – and being shaped by – con-

temporary society is important to you. Can you elaborate on this?

Not so long ago, the philosophy of technology was deterministic – at least in the social sciences. Most researchers thought that technology determined society pretty much along the lines sketched by Marx: the technical infrastructure and the forces of production shaping the superstructures. It was also widely believed that technical progress was contingent on scientific progress, and scientific progress itself was viewed as extrinsic to society. So in the end you had a theory that technology had the power to shape society without being shaped by it: a one-way street. What has changed is that we now recognise – as the result of a generation of struggles around the Internet, the environment, medical systems, and so on – that technology is also shaped by society. It is not a one-way street, it's a two-way street. And we call this 'co-production' of technology and society. It requires a premise that explains how this is possible. This is the notion of underdetermination, the idea that technical development is not determined exclusively and fully by technical considerations. This makes more sense than the deterministic view. As many engineers know, there are always many ways to do things with technology. The engineer is faced with a whole variety of solutions to the problem he's been given, and he chooses one among them. This is where the social intervenes – in the choice among viable options.

Many people have the view that 'technology will save us' – can it?

Certainly we are working hard on getting ourselves saved with technical innovations, with new ways of generating energy and so on. In some countries, like Denmark, they've succeeded in replacing a large proportion of their fossil fuel resources with renewable energy. If you take that as a model, you could imagine huge reductions in greenhouse gas emissions and perhaps a viable adjustment to climate change. Of course, the political resistance – and economic and corporate resistance – to that is very strong. The political advocacy for change is relatively feeble so far. People have to connect all the terrible weather events that they're encountering to the climate change hypothesis in order to begin to put more pressure on their political leaders to make the necessary adjustments.

But will people give up the benefits they receive from a life of overconsuming and overpolluting?

People's preferences have to change. This has happened in the past. I remember when OPEC tripled the price of oil and people had to line up at petrol stations in the United States for hours to get petrol. Suddenly small cars became more attractive and people discovered advantages in smallness. The small cars had much better suspensions and steering, they were easier to park, you could manoeuvre your way out of traffic jams. So the market for smaller cars emerged at that time out of economic necessity, but it has stayed around out of changed preferences. The economics is more flexible than people often think. We pay more for cars but they are better and use much less fuel than they used to. I can easily imagine changes occurring along similar lines in response to the climate issue. For example, the generalisation of solar to create energy on rooftops might result in cheaper energy. What is the generating capacity of all those roofs that are now just used to keep the rain out? In Australia alone it's probably enough to power the whole planet. N

There's no way to sum up this system in a single message that would enable us to condemn it or praise it.

Photo: Per Gosche

Part of the technical system

Would you live in a simulation?

by Russell Blackford

In a much-discussed philosophical thought experiment, the late Robert Nozick asked whether we'd be prepared to plug into an "experience machine": an imaginary device that could provide us with the illusion of experience in a pleasant pseudo-reality. Nozick was betting on a negative answer – that we'd rather live real lives than simulated lives of pleasure or comfort, or even (what would seem like) a perfect movie adventure. Happy dreams are all very well, but Nozick's idea appeals to an intuition that we value our involvement in the real world.

We want to *do* certain things – so Nozick suggests – to *be* certain ways, and to live actively in substantial contact with reality. In other words, we want lives of self-creation and authenticity.

Nozick was not the first philosopher to contemplate life in a kind of virtual reality. In the 17th century, at the dawn of modern western philosophy, René Descartes questioned how he could be sure he was not constantly and systematically deceived by a powerful, malicious demon, in which case everything he experienced would be an illusion. Descartes settled this to his own satisfaction by 'proving' the existence of a good, non-deceiving deity who would not permit such a state of affairs. It's now widely thought, however, that his 'proofs' fail and that we can't logically rule out extreme sceptical conjectures.

An updated version of the 'evil demon' scenario is the idea of a brain in a vat, famously associated with the American philosopher Hilary Putnam. The thought is that I might be merely a brain hooked up to advanced lab equipment that provides sensory input, including the illusion of possessing a body and moving about in the world. Putnam argues that this is not a coherent suspicion that I could have about myself. At least superficially, however, it sounds like a logical (though extraordinarily far-fetched) possibility. In spectacular fashion, complete with impressive special effects, Hollywood portrayed something like it in *The Matrix* and its sequels.

Oxford-based philosopher Nick Bostrom has argued that we actually might be living within a simulated reality. The idea makes sense, he claims, if we imagine that human beings will eventually run computer simulations of historical settings (including conscious software agents who participate in the events). If that is somehow possible, we might be part of a simulation being run by a society far more technologically advanced than our own. If a multitude of these "ancestor simulations" exist, the odds are that we are living in one, rather than in the single real reality.

How unsettling should all this be? The frequent assumption is that there's something profoundly troubling, bleak, even repugnant, about the whole idea of living in a simulation. Movies such as *The Matrix* trade on this: characters such as Neo, Morpheus, and Trinity rebel against the machines that control their simulated world. But whether or not you would want to take part in a simulated reality might depend on the details.

We can easily imagine that a simulation of reality would include sensual pleasures for the software agents who inhabit it. It might also include more rarefied emotional and intellectual experiences (falling in love, say, or creating art, or contemplating philosophical puzzles). But could life in a simulation offer authenticity and genuine freedom? These clearly don't exist in Nozick's thought experiment, but let's tinker slightly with the experience machine's specifications.

For example, if you were the only sentient being in a simulated reality you could not form genuine relationships with other people. Their appearance of love or respect (or otherwise!) for you would be an illusion. But what if the other people you encountered were just as sentient and self-aware as you are, albeit (like you) software artefacts? In that case, at least some of what you care about – how others feel about you as a unique individual – would be real. Furthermore, if you were engaging in genuine choices and interactions that affected your future and tended to shape your own character, you'd have a kind of self-creative freedom. Contrast a situation where the course of events is controlled from outside the simulation by a demon or a mad scientist.

Perhaps we can adjust the parameters of the thought experiment until life in a computer simulation seems just as good – or almost as good – as life in the ordinary physical world. The simulation might run independently, once it's established, with no ongoing outside interference; it might involve real, effective choices by its inhabitants; and it might, as I've mentioned, include genuine relationships. But what if its inhabitants are unaware that they are living in a simulation and have no way to discover the truth? That still sounds disconcerting. Would they be leading inauthentic lives in their cyber-bubble, sealed off from the larger universe?

That intriguing thought suggests a more general issue: for thousands of years, philosophers in both eastern and western traditions have asked whether our lives in the ordinary world take place in ignorance of a higher, or deeper, reality. In one of his greatest dialogues, *The Republic*, Plato taught that we fail to perceive the metaphysical truth that lies behind our existence in the world of the senses. We are like prisoners in a cave looking away from a fire, seeing nothing but the shadows it casts on a wall. In Plato's allegory, we are several steps from escaping our cave and seeing by the light of the sun.

Consider, too, the dramatic findings of modern science. Cumulatively, these show us that fundamental aspects of our space-time universe, including the origins of our own species, are not as they appeared to the pre-scientific mind or to untrained common sense. But does it follow that all the people who lived before the discoveries of Galileo, Newton, Darwin, and Einstein, among others, were living inauthentic lives? We seem to need a more charitable standard for whether people are living authentically. Perhaps we could judge people – and the lives they lead – relative to what knowledge of reality is reasonably available to them if they are intellectually curious and honest.

Bostrom's views notwithstanding, I doubt that we are living in a computer simulation. We may, however, be living with some important, pervasive misconceptions. Even worse – if we think of it that way – our ability to discover the truth about the universe and ourselves may eventually come up against hard limits. At any rate, much remains unknown to us despite the rapid advance of science since Galileo's era. This is, I think, unsettling and humbling, but it grants us space for adventures of the mind. N

Plato taught that... we are like prisoners in a cave looking away from a fire, seeing nothing but the shadows it casts on a wall.

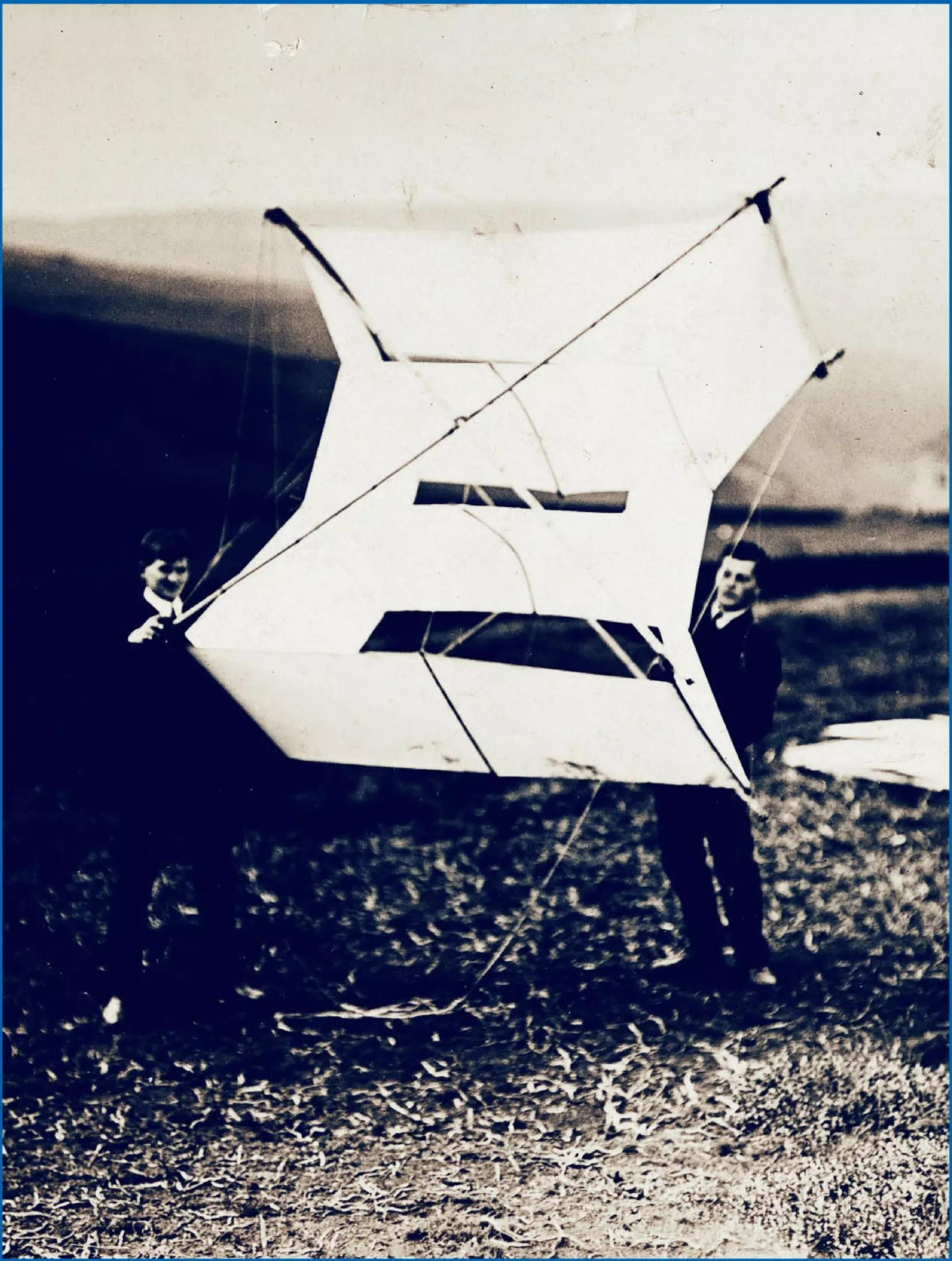
> Technology is the knack of so arranging the world that we don't have to experience it.
>
> **Max Frisch**

Photo: Jiuguang Wang

The Second Coming

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned.
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

Excerpt from *The Second Coming*,
by W.B. Yeats



Ludwig Wittgenstein and William Eccles at the kite-flying station in Glossop , England, (1908). **Courtesy of the Wittgenstein Archive.**

Wittgenstein's Jet

by David Edmonds

Soldier, gardener, primary school teacher, architect, hospital porter, and one of the most prominent philosophers of the 20th century. Not a bad CV.

But if that were not enough, Ludwig Wittgenstein also designed a jet engine.

That would have pleased his dad.

Wittgenstein was born in Vienna in 1889 into a family that was almost unimaginably rich. He was the youngest of eight children, and by no means regarded as the cleverest or most talented. His father, Karl, was a dictatorial presence in the family. Karl effectively ran the Austro-Hungarian steel industry and expected his sons to enter the business. Three of his sons killed themselves. One, Hans, was exceptionally musical, and had no interest in steel. Another, Rudolf, had hoped to pursue a career in the theatre.

Wittgenstein's decision to take up engineering studies must have been prompted by Karl. After two years as a student in Berlin he moved to the north of England to become a research student in Manchester University's engineering department. He was 19 years old.

That year, 1908, Wilbur and Orville Wright were making newspaper headlines proving, time after time, that man and machine could remain airborne. It was regarded as a stunning technological breakthrough and Wittgenstein, along with the rest of the world, must have been swept up in the excitement.

He began his research experimenting with kites. Throughout his life Wittgenstein would on occasion seek periods of hermit-like isolation. For his kite research he lived in an out-of-the way pub on the moors, which for a time had only one other guest. Within a year he was trying to design an aircraft engine.

He himself must have been satisfied with his results – otherwise he wouldn't have sought protection for his intellectual property from the patent office. British Patent Number 27,098 was recognition that the patent office itself regarded his design as distinctive.

Wittgenstein's philosophical originality, combined with his mesmerising (and sometimes terrifying) personality, has generated fascination with almost every aspect of his life. In early 2015 there was even a BBC radio programme about his engine, in which an engineer reproduced it from the patent drawings. Wittgenstein's specific innovation was to drive the propeller with little gas nozzles, built on each propeller blade. The gas was forced along to the blades by a high-speed combustion chamber. Whether or not this was ever a viable means of keeping a plane in the air is disputed – but a similar method was later used for helicopters.

Pretty soon Wittgenstein was turning his attention away from aeronautics to philosophy. Indeed, we have his jet engine to thank for the works that would follow. To calculate how his propeller could operate he had to study high-level mathematics. That, in turn, got him brooding over the foundations of mathematics, ultimately leading him to read *The Principles of Mathematics*.

Which is how the young engineering student found himself knocking on a door in Trinity College, Cambridge, to introduce himself to that book's famous author, Bertrand Russell. At the end of the first term in Cambridge, Wittgenstein asked the aristocratic sage a question: he wanted to know whether he was useless at philosophy; if he was he would return to engineering. Russell asked him to produce some work in the holiday. When Wittgenstein showed it to him at the start of the next term, Russell came to a rapid verdict: Wittgenstein must not become an engineer.

Wittgenstein published only one book of philosophy during his lifetime, much of which was written in the trenches of the First World War. The austere but beautiful *Tractatus Logico Philosophicus* was once described as a "logical poem". The rest of Wittgenstein's work appeared posthumously and radically rethought the *Tractatus*.

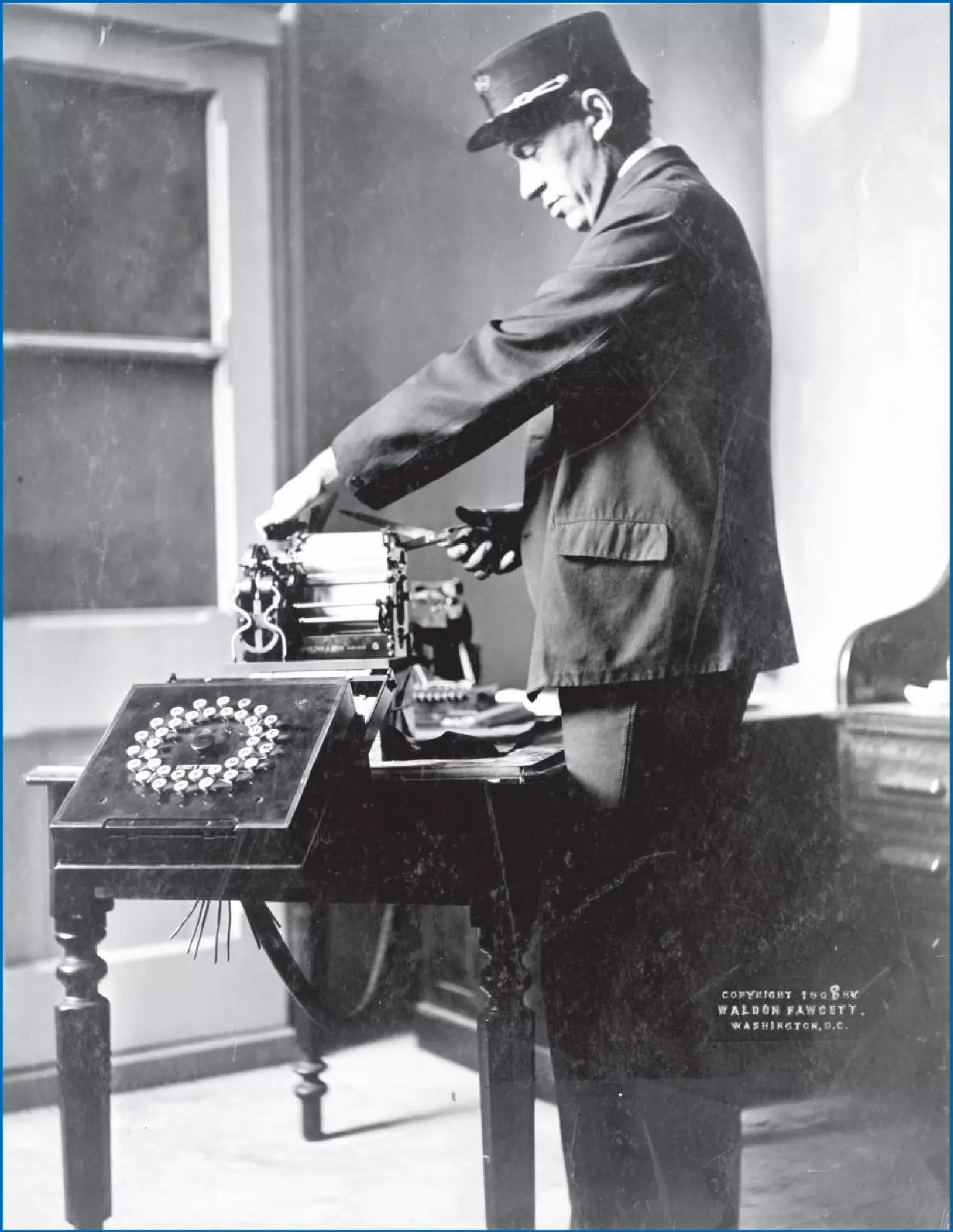
One of Wittgenstein's central preoccupations throughout his life was the relationship between language and the world. In the *Tractatus* he uses the metaphor of a picture: a proposition such as "the kite is on the table" somehow pictures the state of affairs in which there is a kite on a table.

Later, Wittgenstein abandoned this idea and replaced it with another metaphor in which his engineering background was apparent. Language was now to be understood as a tool. What the philosopher needs to do is to attend to how words and sentences are used. Some words might look as if they perform similar functions, but actually operate under distinct sets of rules. It is like peering into the cabin of a locomotive. We see handles that all look more or less alike: "But one is the handle of a crank which can be moved continuously (it regulates the opening of a valve); another is the handle of a switch, which has only two effective positions, it is either off or on; a third is the handle of a brake-lever, the harder one pulls on it the harder it brakes; a fourth, the handle of a pump; it has an effect only so long as it moved to and fro."

The older Wittgenstein had a different writing style to his younger self. The early Wittgenstein builds up to his conclusions with undeviating exactitude. The later Wittgenstein is more roundabout – addressing the same puzzle from several angles. Still, there is a precision throughout Wittgenstein's work that surely owes something to his first vocation.

We should be thankful that Wittgenstein didn't remain an engineer: that would have been a loss to philosophy. But perhaps we should be just as thankful that he began as one.

The austere but beautiful *Tractatus Logico Philosophicus* was once described as a "logical poem".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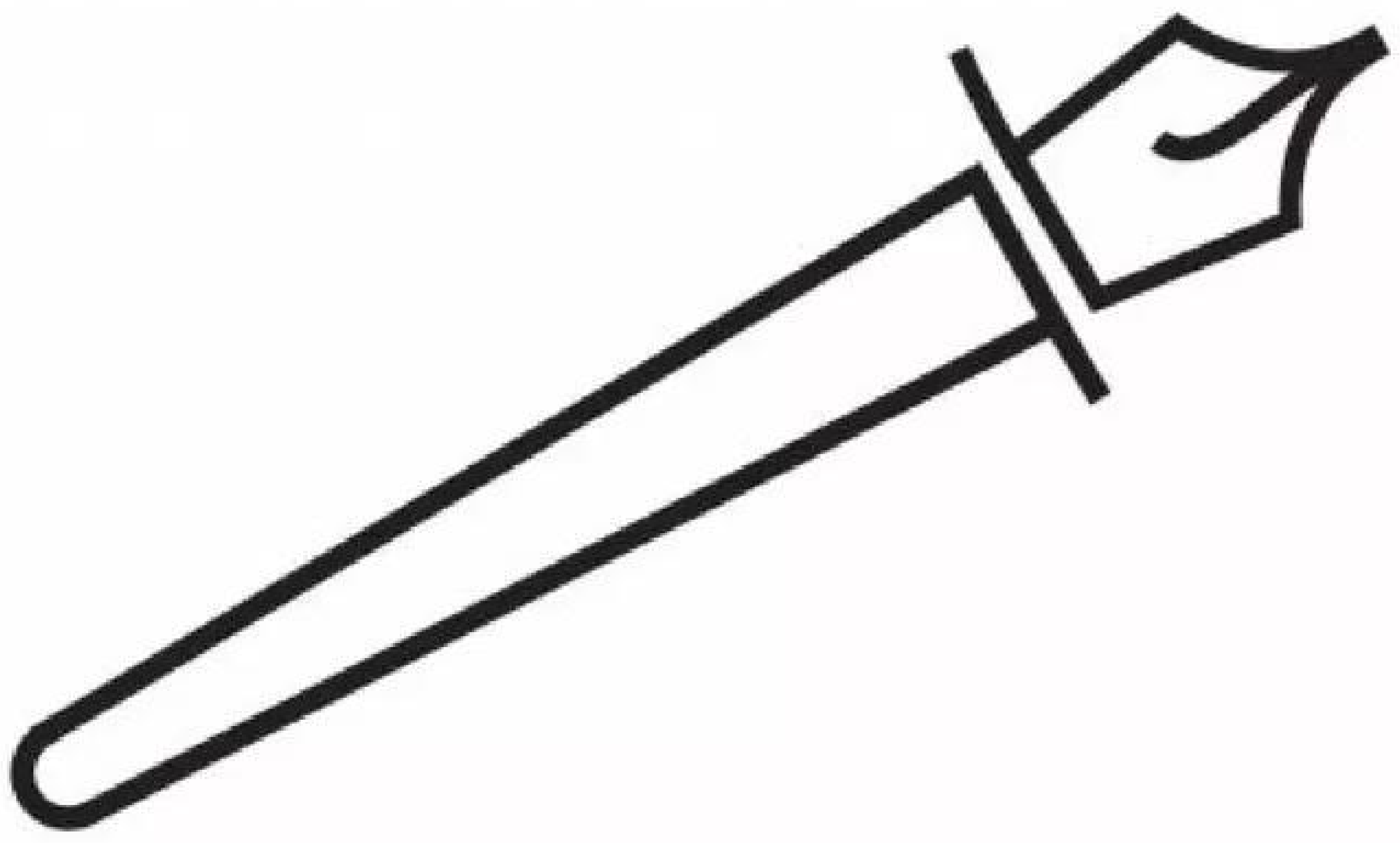


Here we present the winners of *New Philosopher* Writers' Award IX: property. Award-winning poet Angela Smith has taken out top spot for the second time in a row with her non-fiction piece *Filthy bourgoise*. Sheila Pham was awarded second place for her essay *Our love affair with foreign home ownership*.

'Filthy bourgoise'

by Angela Smith

Insects and amphibians are not the only things that metamorphose; suburbs do it too, especially those in the shadow of the central business districts of post-industrial metropolises. Garage sales are one indicator of this metamorphosis, the shedding of one skin for another.

The skip appeared a few days after the weekend garage sale at a cottage two blocks from my house. I had bought a set of bone-handled cutlery from the worn items on offer, the kind of utilitarian objects that witness our domestic lives. The skip was piled high with the discarded history of the old woman who owned the cottage. I retrieved a wire pot-plant stand, and a notebook with the words "Photostat Register" in elaborate cursive script on its black cover. The notebook began with an aide-memoire (Label Ancestors' Photographs, Ring Bruce, Jet Beads), and a list of furniture with names alongside (Jenny and Tim). Recipes from *The Australian Women's Weekly* (Quick Salad Dressing with Carnation Milk, Peanut Butter Caramel Sauce), and a handwritten recipe for Sausage Meat and Pineapple (Cook very slowly until done. Serve with apple sauce.) filled other pages.

Sometime after the house was auctioned, another skip appeared on the street. The metal hand grip that the old woman had used to haul herself up the front step had been chucked on top of building materials ripped from the renovator's opportunity. Over many months, the worker's cottage was transformed into a sleek contemporary home at least triple its original size. New Australian houses are the biggest in the world, more than three times their UK counterparts and even larger than American houses. Accommodating fewer people with more possessions, they are designed to enable children to conduct their virtual lives in the privacy of their en-suited bedrooms while their parents retreat to the other end of the house.

It's unlikely that the well-heeled occupants of the renovated cottage eat cheap cuts of meat like sausage meat, but if they do, they won't be able to buy it around the corner as the butcher is now an upmarket clothing boutique. Nor will they be able to get a haircut at the Australian and Continental Barber, waiting in line on jaded vinyl chairs under a tinsel Christmas relic; or pick up a *Women's Weekly* from the local newsagent, which went bust after losing the lottery licence. But they can get their skinny lattes from the corner café (a former chemist), one of a rash of cafés in the neighbourhood, and join a group fitness session in the park, which used to be a tip.

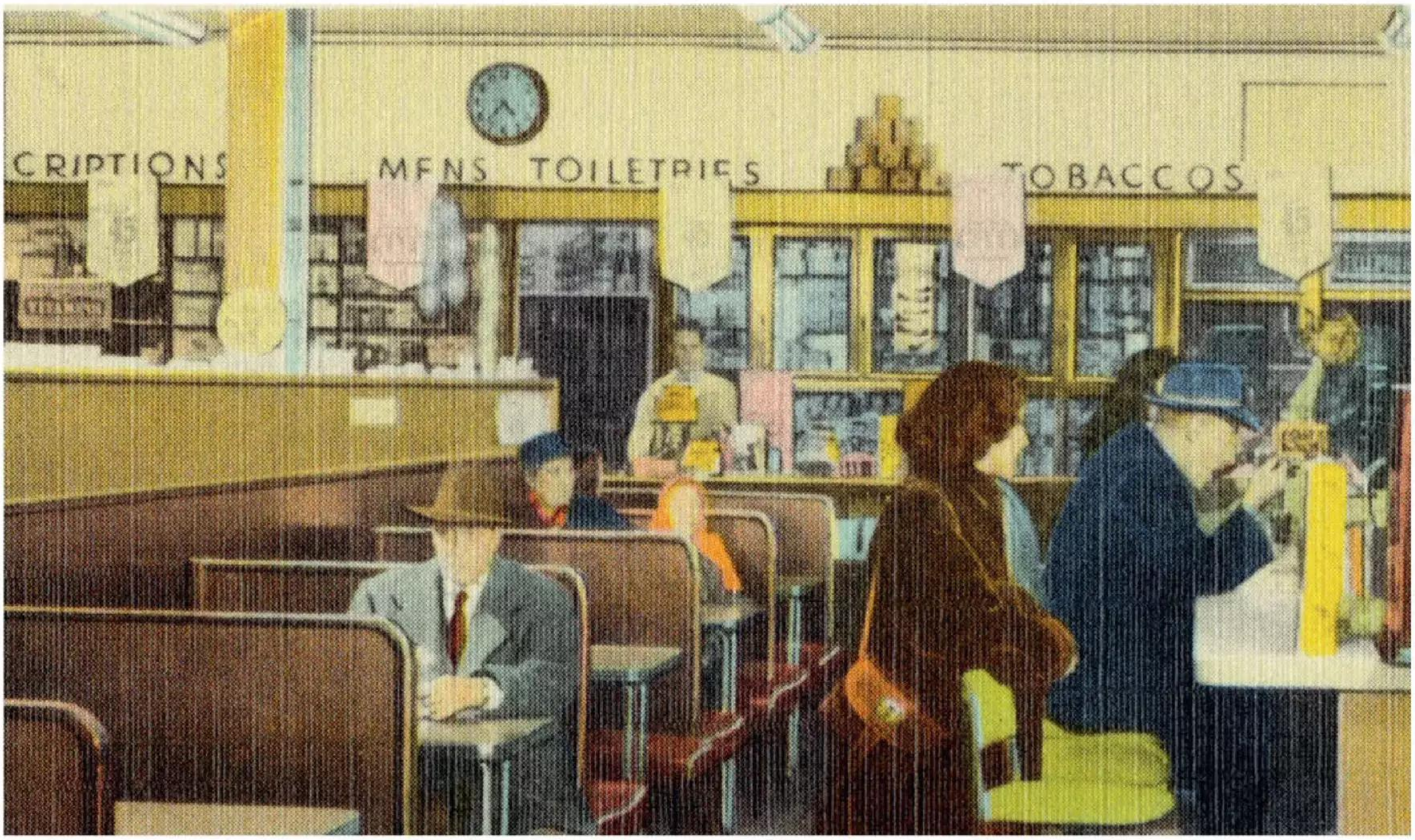
In her 1961 book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Jane Jacobs argued in favour of dense, built-up cities. Cities with mixed uses, people, activities, and timetables with changes occurring piecemeal, rather than the wholesale bulldozing of inner city 'slums' and their replacement with high rise towers, a strategy that public authorities were pursuing at the time. The old-style, built-up streets, Jacobs argued, were safer and more vital than the Le Corbusian utopia of high-rise towers. The book became an international bestseller, and as the late Australian historian and social commentator Hugh Stretton noted facetiously in his own book *Ideas for Australian Cities,* Jacobs' influence was far-reaching:

> *"The book was for some years the bible of the Carlton and Richmond intellectuals who read claret-stained copies of it, sometimes by the light of candles stuck in bottles, in their refurbished terrace houses under the long shadow of the Housing Commission towers."*

The wholesale razing of inner suburbs was halted through the efforts of activists and a more enlightened approach by planning authorities. However, gentrification of these areas often resulted in less diversity of land uses and a more homogenous demography. In my own inner-city Melbourne suburb, formerly inhabited by low-income Australians and Italian migrants, the workers' cottages have been tarted up and extended to cater to contemporary aspirations. Most of the corner shops have been turned into housing, and its industrial buildings transformed into pricey apartments bought by people attracted by proximity to the city, good public transport, and expansive parkland. In real-estate parlance, it's got location, location, location. But as the gap between house prices and average incomes grows ever wider, in common with the inner suburbs of many post-industrial cities, it has been gentrified into a place beyond the reach of anyone who hasn't climbed to the higher peaks of the income scale. (Even a car space in inner Sydney or Melbourne can sell for more than a house in a regional Australian town.) And so the students in their share houses with their African drumming classes and their garage bands have moved further out in search of cheaper rentals. Perhaps one of these dispossessed students etched this graffito into a concrete footpath: 'Filthy bourgoise [sic] Lily'.

On a wall nearby, a graffiti artist with an ontological preoccupation has spray-painted the words: "I don't exist. Neither do you." But we do exist – through the agency of our material possessions. In a society in which everything is commoditised, we are defined by what we own rather than who we are. A house is a signifier of social status and identity. Rather than places we call home, houses have become commodities in the real estate market, investment vehicles subject to the vagaries of the market. (In an interesting departure from standard practice, a Melbourne developer recently instigated an innovative model that 'aims to deliver apartments as housing rather than apartments as commodity' by building affordable, well-designed, sustainable apartments with lower profit margins, and restrictions on resale to discourage speculative trading.)

In 2014, there were more than eleven million unoccupied houses in Europe. Hundreds of thousands of half-built houses were bulldozed in an attempt to prop up the price of existing properties. The Irish government demolished entire housing estates built during the boom but never occupied; Deutsche Bank warned that unless the population growth rate increased, it would take forty-three years to fill the oversupply of homes. Campaign charity Empty Homes estimates that there are more than 600,000 vacant dwellings in the UK; 200,000 of these properties have been unoccupied for more than six months. In Japan, there are eight million unoccupied dwellings, many of which have been inherited by family members who have no use for them. Yet despite the glut of older dwellings and a shrinking population, more than 800,000 new homes are built in Japan every year. And in China, there are entire ghost cities, new urban areas with no occupants; contributory causes include a lack of physical and social infrastructure, fiscal policy, oversupply, and speculative investment. As for Australia, a long property boom and favourable tax treatment of investment properties have encouraged Australians to treat houses as investments rather than homes. A report by Prosper Australia estimated that 64,386 properties in Melbourne (4.4% of its housing stock) were potentially vacant in 2013.



Soda fountain & booths, East Greenwich. **Source: Boston Public Library**

Meanwhile, millions of people around the world are homeless, and sixty million are displaced worldwide.

Despite the dominant ethos that assigns a monetary value to every aspect of our lives, the houses in which we live are not simply marketable assets; they are embedded with personal associations and recollections. David Malouf has written evocatively about first homes and neighbourhoods, places experienced through the senses. In his essay *A First Place*, Malouf suggests that these places remain with us throughout our lives, shaping our psyches, influencing the way we experience and map the world. Carrying traces of the past, they become part of dream and memory. Walking in a familiar neighbourhood becomes a form of remembrance. When I walk past the renovated house I described at the beginning of this essay, it is ghosted by its former, more modest self; overlaid with my mental image of how it once looked. An image from my archive of memories.

In the summer of 2013-2014, the National Gallery of Victoria held an exhibition called *Melbourne Now*. One of the exhibits was a series of photographs, *Milk Bars of Melbourne*. Photographer David Wadelton had trawled Melbourne's streets, taking pictures of old shops, capturing a memento mori of the suburban landscape. From the window of my upstairs bedroom, I look across to one of the shops featured in Wadelton's series. The Mini World Supermarket neon sign no longer lights up at night but the shop still operates, the owners working long hours, seven days a week, hanging on to their old business model: a mixed business of milk and bread and newspapers, socks, dim sims and sparklers, clothing repairs and phone cards. When the shop closes, as it inevitably will, Wadelton's memento mori will remain, along with my memory of the former owner doing his daily t'ai chi practice on the pavement outside his shop. Accompanied by a rackety dawn chorus of birdsong, his arms traced the air, tracing images of a time and place that no longer exists, except in memory. N

RUNNER-UP

WRITERS' AWARD IX

Our love affair with foreign home ownership

Sheila Ngoc Pham

"What was supposed to be a large in-ground, natural pond with native fish and water plants turned into an above-ground cement pool for dwarfs… which may have been pleasing if I were a garden gnome."

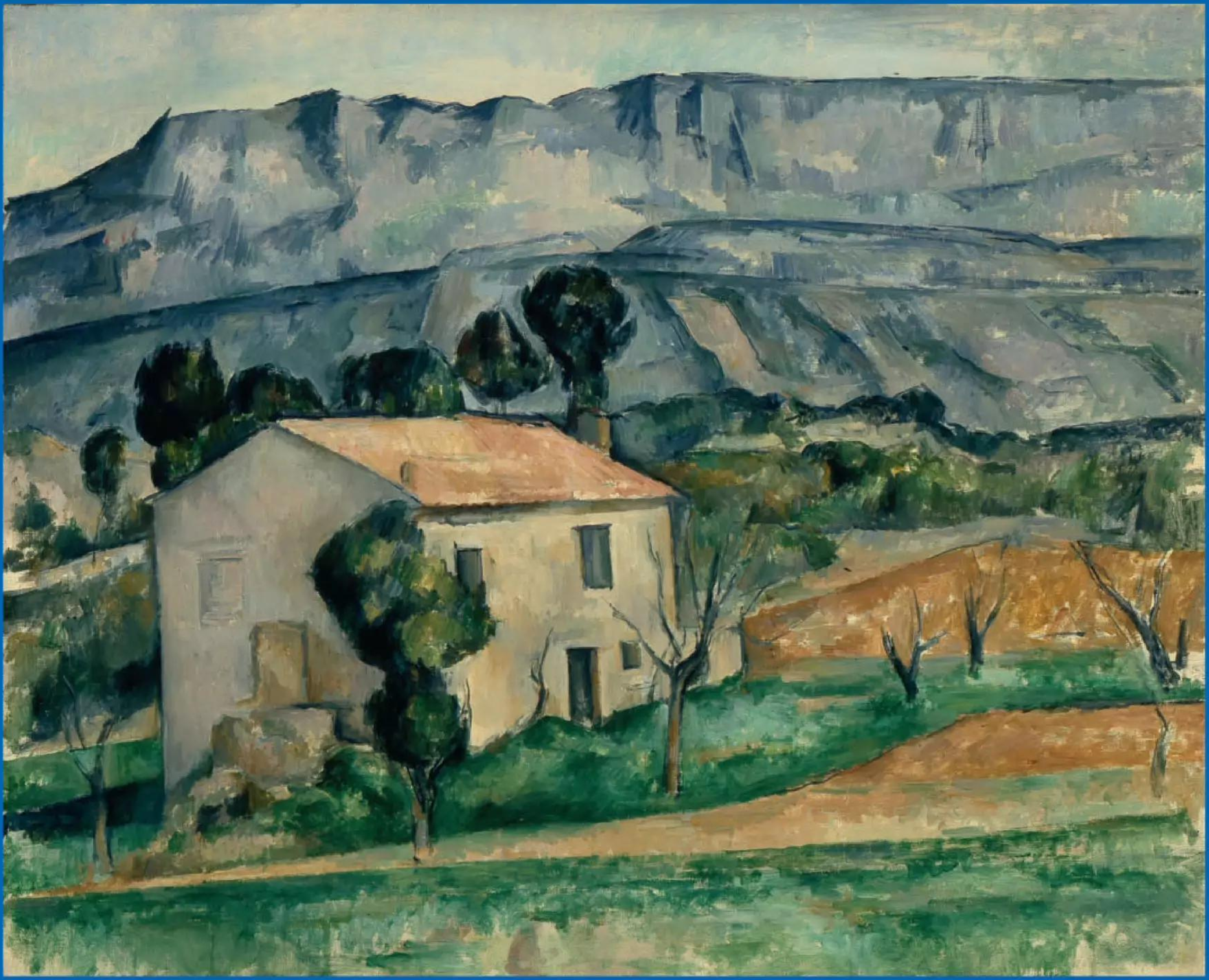
My friend Stuart's amusing emails over the past few years describing the renovations of their newly acquired home in the south of France reads like a guilty pleasure. Their stone village house was being made more comfortable to create a "retirement dream home" for the two of them in the coming decade. His cast of characters have so far included a French building manager who "looks like General de Gaulle but dresses like Mr Bean", an Englishman who "has attention deficit disorder and needs a month or two break after renovating each room", and an offer from a neighbour to "bring unemployed Romanian trapeze artists to work on the house (great for roofing)".

Twenty-five years after Peter Mayle's bestseller was published, *A Year in Provence* endures and my friend's adventures reinforce the truth of that celebrated memoir. Not only did it define a particular subgenre of memoir about buying homes abroad and renovating, it's a concept that's also become fodder for reality television shows. The popularity of the idea reflects that owning property in a desirable part of the world remains a classic of the home-owning genre: a middle-class dream – a fixer-upper holiday home – and an upper-class reality – used depending on the season.

From where I'm sitting on a distant shore, the very idea of possessing a home in the south of France has a romantic allure impossible to resist. Any concern I might have about excess acquisition is conveniently unvoiced. Given we live in a world where such ownership is lawful, is there anything inherently problematic about buying a second home abroad, particularly in view of retirement? While living in a new purpose-built apartment in an expat ghetto is looked down upon, it somehow feels worthy to buy an old home and renovate it. It's viewed as bestowal in material terms, with the obvious display of wealth mitigated by the hard toil involved with renovation, which even feels virtuous.

The idea of virtue through renovation was top of mind during my recent stay in the medina of Marrakech in an elegant riad owned by two well-heeled Anglo-French men, Michael and Michel. There was little about the establishment that suggested insensitive neocolonialism to my critical eye. Instead, what I saw was a beautifully maintained property run along ethical lines with staff treated well, attention paid to the environmental impact, and a number of local charities supported.

I was curious about what possessed them to buy the riad and renovate it as they did, honouring traditional style. "We fell in love with Marrakech," explains Michael. The financial incentive seemed a lesser factor than the romance and desire for change. This initial longing had led to unspoken complexi-



House in Provence, **by Paul Cézanne** ties like any passionate love affair inevitably leads to. Truly, is there any motive purer than love?

On my walking tour around town my local Moroccan guide Mohammed criticised Europeans for buying riads, turning them into boutique accommodation and pushing up property prices so they are out of the reach of ordinary Moroccans. "I would like to buy one but I can't afford it," he said with a note of anger in his voice.

Romance led Michael and Michel to move to Marrakech a decade earlier, but they soon discovered that ownership does not naturally lead to acceptance. "We're foreigners, we just didn't belong in the old city," says Michel, explaining that while they worked in the Old City, they moved out to Nouvelle Ville – which was less oppressive to transplants. They discovered that the closed walls of the medina are unwelcoming to outsiders with no lineage; intense feelings of rejection common to migrants everywhere.

I don't doubt that Mohammed is right in that the price of property has increased, perhaps partly due to foreigners chasing the dream of riad renovation. But is restoring a riad to meet the comfort of international travellers something many middle-class Morrocan aspire to? Many would probably have little to do with life inside the traditional medina and perhaps even find it backwards. Yes, it's a consequentialist justification, but such hotels do encourage tourism, a significant source of income for locals like Mohammed.

In a lower-middle-income country like Morocco, with its French colonial legacy and high levels of corruption, employment options are limited, as is social mobility. In such circumstances perhaps such ethical foreign contribution can be a force for good, especially when the elite is untouchable – and includes a royal family. During my week at the riad in Marrakech I had several long conversations with both men, and talking to them recalled many of my own feelings about living in Thailand.

During the time I lived in Thailand I earned a salary that put me in the top few per cent of income in Chiang Mai. I reasoned to myself that I wasn't taking jobs from anyone since very few locals would be qualified to do what I did – developing documents in English for international bodies like the World Health Organisation – and my contribution in taxes to the Thai state alone probably exceeded the annual income of most. Yet I found it impossible to ignore my undeniable and even obscene privilege, which had been far less apparent back home in Australia where I felt typical of the emerging middle-class.

In Chiang Mai I rented a luxury 'condo' which was well set up for foreigners passing through. Renting is the norm for non-Thais because Thailand does have some measures in place to limit foreign ownership of their land. I would regularly hear people criticise this feature of the law because their sense of First World entitlement shaped their expectations. Many found ways to circumvent the laws, such as by finding trusted Thais they could financially support – and even marrying them – in exchange for their invaluable birthright: the ability to possess land. In a globalised real estate market, foreign home ownership is a common phenomenon because the world's wealth is increasingly concentrated in the hands of the few.

There's something romantic about possessing a holiday home abroad in a beautiful part of the world like the south of France, but closer to home it can feel like a threat from outsiders instead of being imbued with romance – though it also depends on who the foreigners in question are. A recent headline reads "Australia to crack down on foreign investors buying up property" and photos of people holding placards which proclaim, "It's a foreign invasion", and more to the point, "Stop the Chinese invasion".

Ownership of property, wherever it may be, is inherently an exercise in reinforcing societal inequality, though there are perhaps ways to mitigate the worst effects such as the creation of employment, the procurement of local services, and contributing to the local community. However, when the script is flipped and the foreign ownership occurs right at one's doorstep, it can be played out as anything but a love affair. ▣

W r

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Award X

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Award XI

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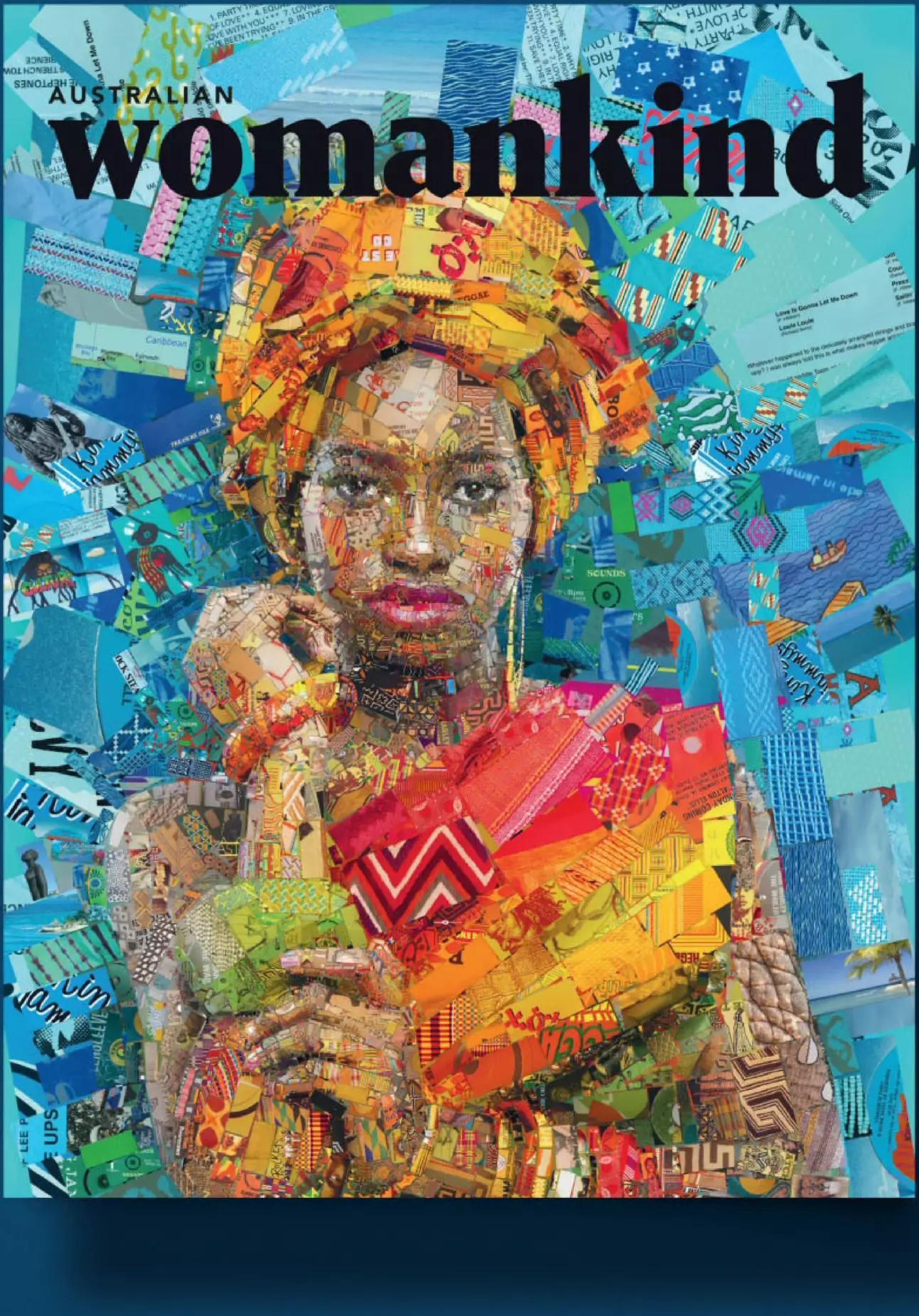

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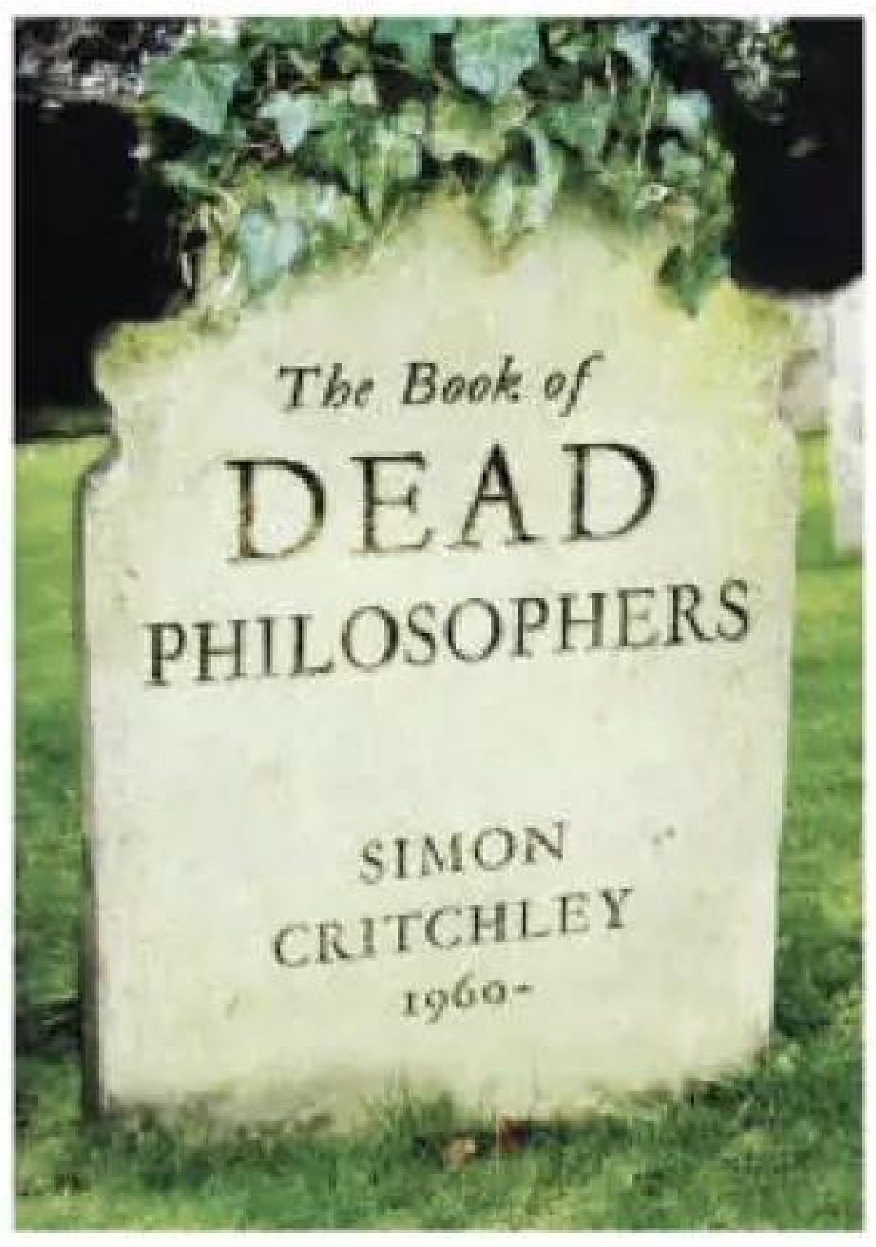
La Vie Electrique

Albert Robida

Frivolous notions

"So, I'm going to marry you off..."
"May one know to whom?"
"That doesn't concern you. I don't know myself, yet. I need a true scientific mind, sufficiently mature – as mature as possible, in order to have a head free from all frivolous notions..."
Georges was about to reply when the first electric shock due to the accident at Station 17 was produced. Georges fell into his armchair and swiftly raised his feet, in order to avoid contact with the floor, which was transmitting further shocks.

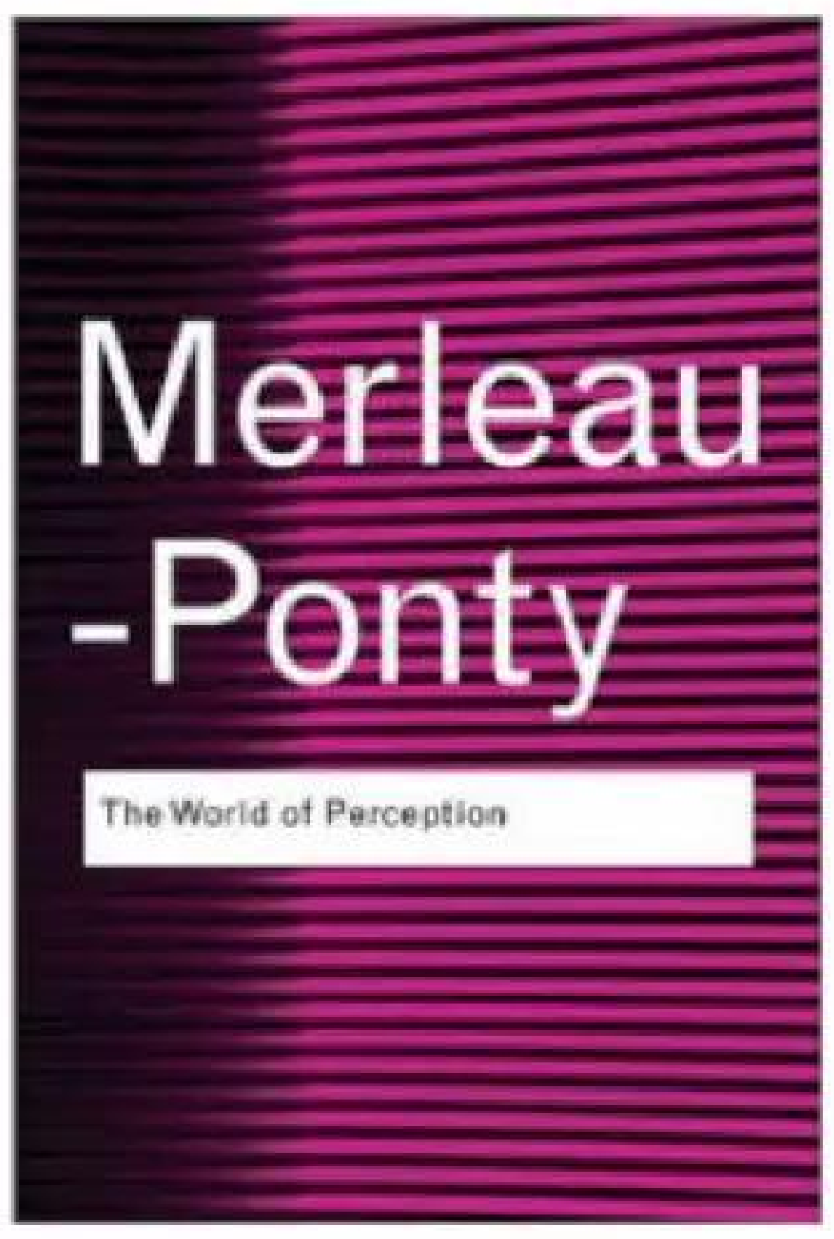


The Book of Dead Philosophers

Simon Critchley

True purpose

Schopenhauer is the Eeyore of Continental philosophy, insisting that existence is really some sort of mistake and, "life is an expiation of the crime of being born." That said, Schopenhauer does have a point: if the purpose of human life is not suffering, then human beings are ill adapted to its true purpose. Affliction, pain, illness, and woe are everywhere.



The World of Perception

Maurice Merleau-Ponty

Witty dialogue

Cinema has yet to provide us with many films that are works of art from start to finish: its infatuation with stars, the sensationalism of the zoom, the twists and turns of plot and the intrusion of pretty pictures and witty dialogue, are all tempting pitfalls for films which chase success and, in so doing, eschew properly cinematic means of expression.

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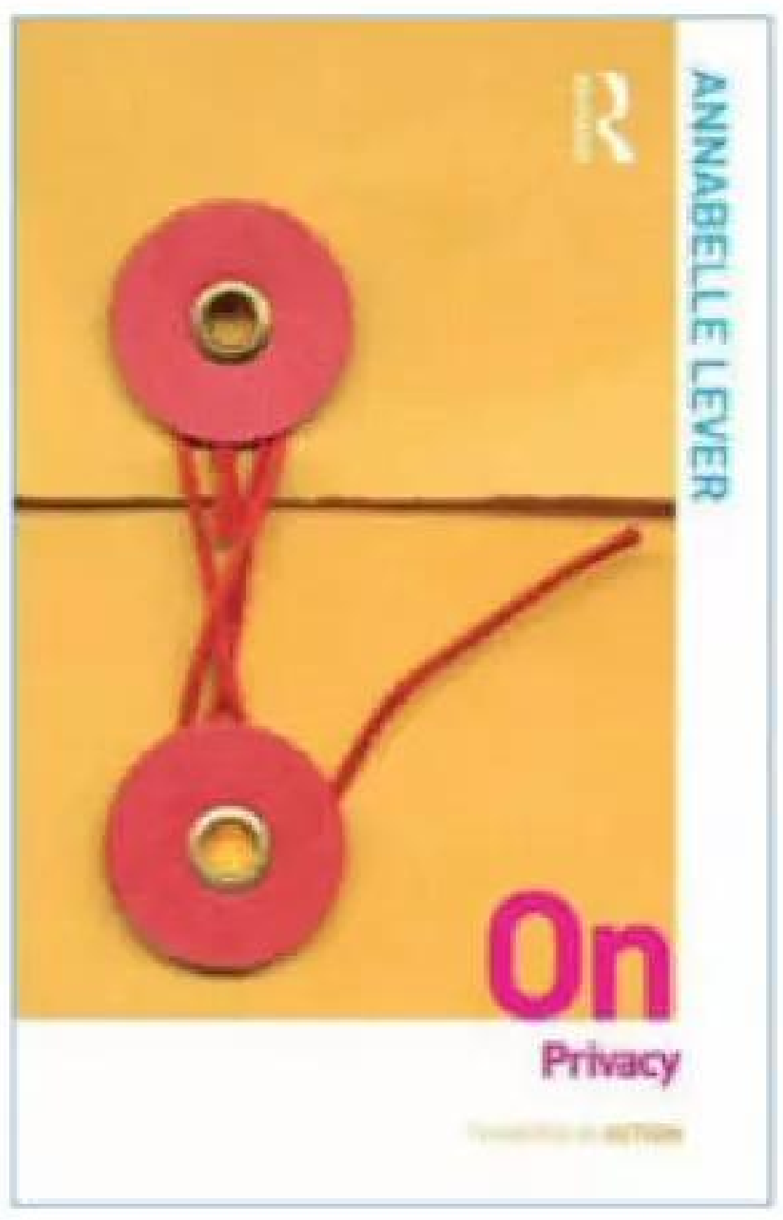
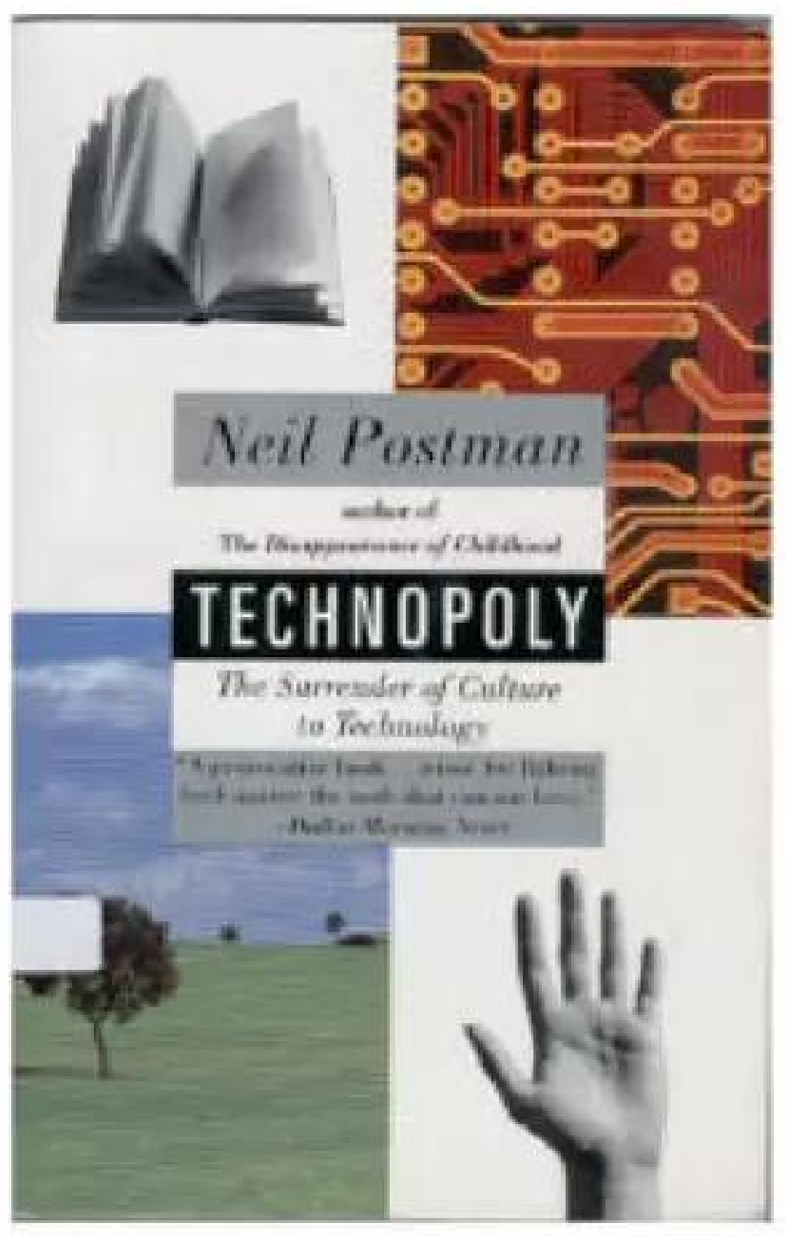


On Privacy

Annabelle Lever

Personal habits

Thomas Nagel believes that the breakdown of established conventions of privacy, since the 1960s, has led to two undesirable results. On the one hand, he thinks, political analysis and debate has been displaced by political gossip about the loves, personal habits, and foibles of politicians and public officials while, on the other hand, greater understanding of the complexity and ambivalence of people's sexual lives and desires has been impeded by the rather infantile level of public discussion of sex.

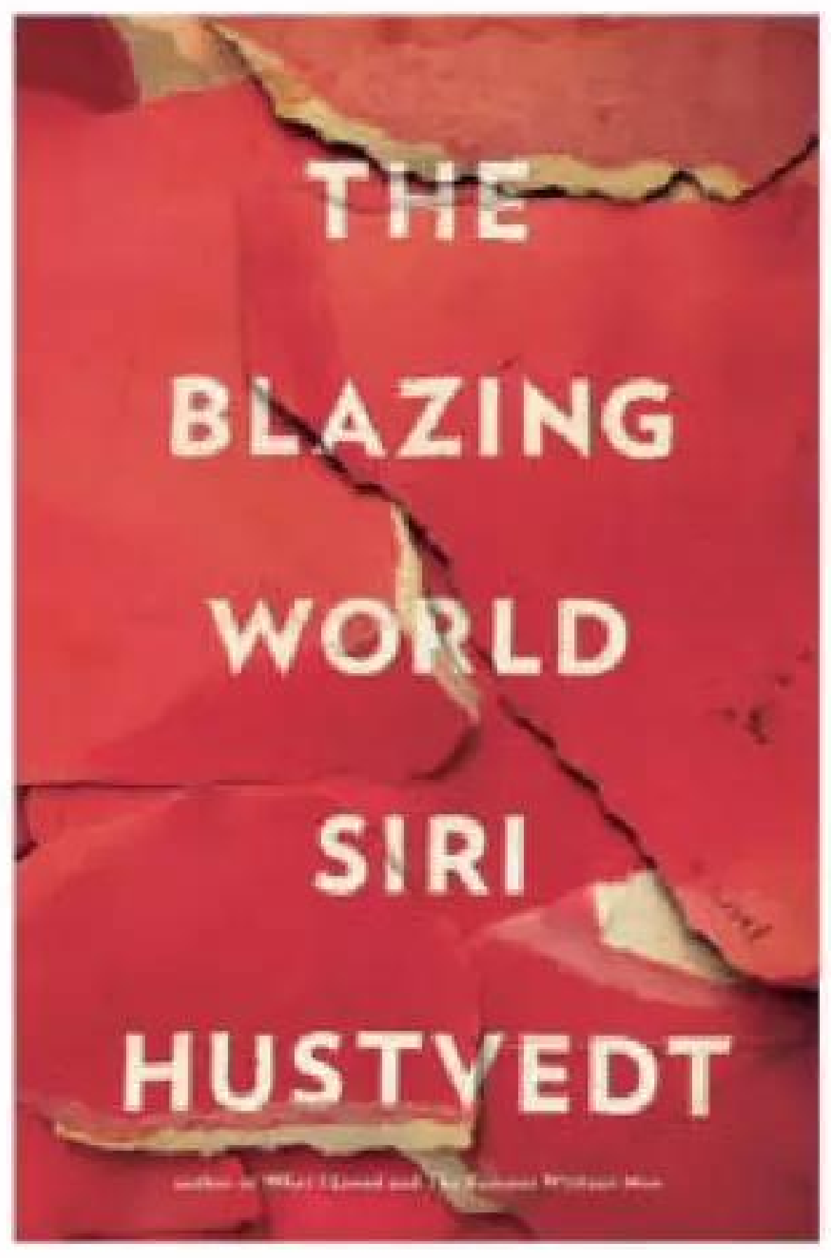


Technopoly

Neil Postman

Social and symbolic worlds

In a technocracy, tools play a central role in the thought-world of the culture. Everything must give way, in some degree, to their development. The social and symbolic worlds become increasingly subject to the requirements of that development. Tools are not integrated into the culture; they attack the culture. They bid to become the culture. As a consequence, tradition, social mores, myth, politics, ritual, and religion have to fight for their lives.



The Blazing World

Siri Hustvedt

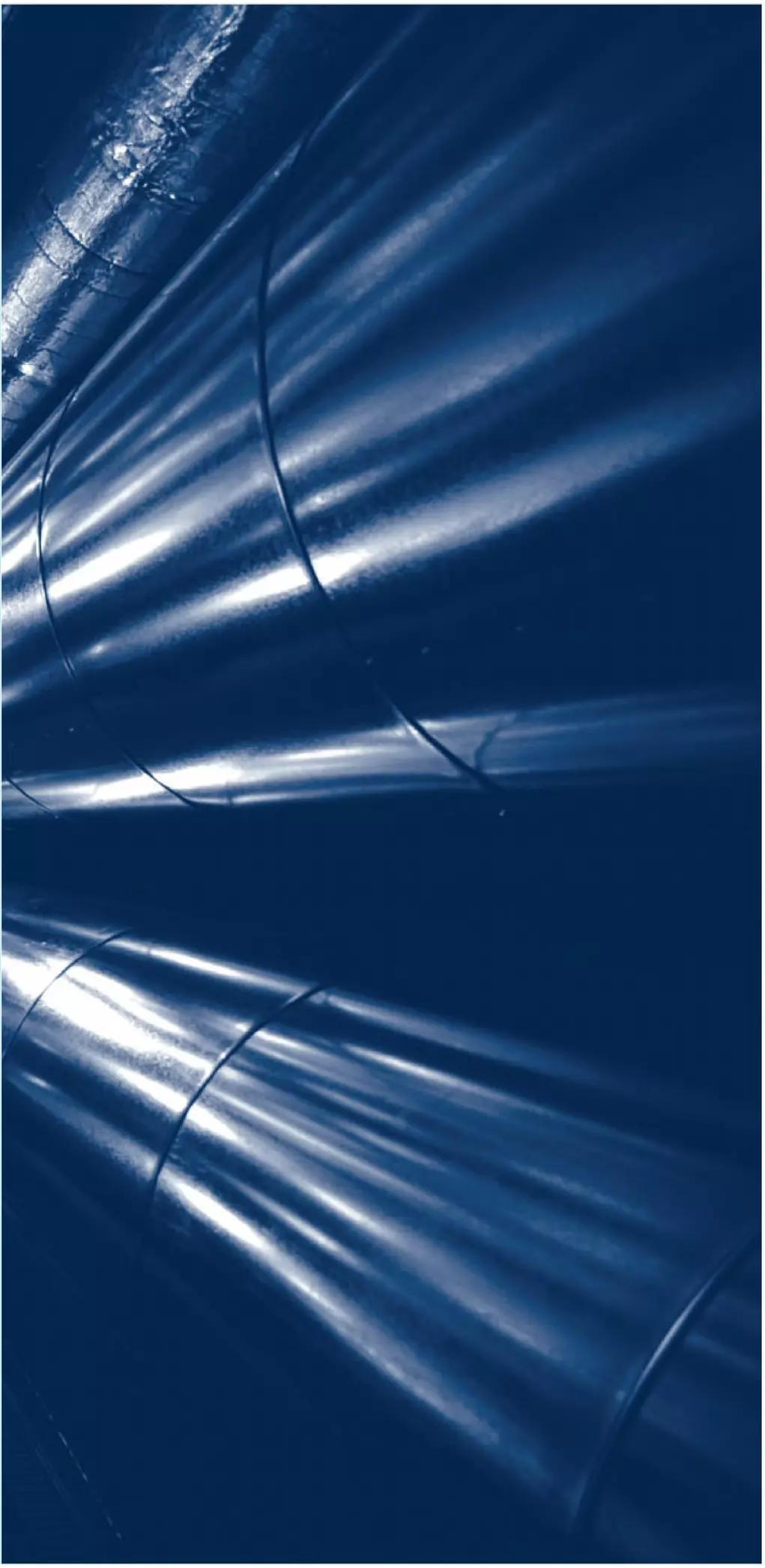
Tool of my vengeance

My whole body churns as I gorge on the reviews and notices and commentaries about the brilliant Rune's coup… Their heads are turned. The man who has written the review in *The Gothamite* does not know he has written about me, not Rune. He doesn't know that the adjectives muscular, rigorous, cerebral can be claimed by me, not Rune. He doesn't know he is a tool of my vengeance.

The machine stops

By E.M. Forster

Photo: Bill Ebbesen



"Who is it?" she called. Her voice was irritable, for she had been interrupted often since the music began. She knew several thousand people, in certain directions human intercourse had advanced enormously.

But when she listened into the receiver, her white face wrinkled into smiles, and she said:

"Very well. Let us talk, I will isolate myself. I do not expect anything important will happen for the next five minutes – for I can give you fully five minutes, Kuno. Then I must deliver my lecture on 'Music during the Australian Period'."

She touched the isolation knob, so that no one else could speak to her. Then she touched the lighting apparatus, and the little room was plunged into darkness.

…

"What is it, dearest boy? Be quick. Why could you not send it by pneumatic post?"

"Because I prefer saying such a thing. I want----"

"Well?"

"I want you to come and see me."

Vashti watched his face in the blue plate.

"But I can see you!" she exclaimed. "What more do you want?"

"I want to see you not through the Machine," said Kuno. "I want to speak to you not through the wearisome Machine."

"Oh, hush!" said his mother, vaguely shocked. "You mustn't say anything against the Machine."

"Why not?"

"One mustn't."

"You talk as if a god had made the Machine," cried the other.

"I believe that you pray to it when you are unhappy. Men made it, do not forget that. Great men, but men. The Machine is much, but it is not everything. I see something like you in this plate, but I do not see you. I hear something like you through this telephone, but I do not hear you. That is why I want you to come. Pay me a visit, so that we can meet face to face, and talk about the hopes that are in my mind."

She replied that she could scarcely spare the time for a visit.

"The air-ship barely takes two days to fly between me and you."

"I dislike air-ships."

"Why?"

"I dislike seeing the horrible brown earth, and the sea, and the stars when it is dark. I get no ideas in an air-ship."

…

"In the air-ship-----" He broke off, and she fancied that he looked sad. She could not be sure, for the Machine did not transmit nuances of expression. It only gave a general idea of people – an idea that was good enough for all practical purposes, Vashti thought. The imponderable bloom, declared by a discredited philosophy to be the actual essence of intercourse, was rightly ignored by the Machine, just as the imponderable bloom of the grape was ignored by the manufacturers of artificial fruit. Something "good enough" had long since been accepted by our race.

"The truth is," he continued, "that I want to see these stars again. They are curious stars. I want to see them not from the air-ship, but from the surface of the earth, as our ancestors did, thousands of years ago. I want to visit the surface of the earth."

She was shocked again.

"Mother, you must come, if only to explain to me what is the harm of visiting the surface of the earth."

"No harm," she replied, controlling herself. "But no advantage. The surface of the earth is only dust and mud, no life remains on it, and you would need a respirator, or the cold of the outer air would kill you. One dies immediately in the outer air."

"I know; of course I shall take all precautions."

"And besides----"

"Well?"

She considered, and chose her words with care. Her son had a queer temper, and she wished to dissuade him from the expedition.

"It is contrary to the spirit of the age," she asserted.

"Do you mean by that, contrary to the Machine?"

"In a sense, but----"

His image is the blue plate faded.

"Kuno!"

He had isolated himself.

…

As for Vashti, her life went peacefully forward until the final disaster. She made her room dark and slept; she awoke and made the room light. She lectured and attended lectures. She exchanged ideas with her innumerable friends and believed she was growing more spiritual. At times a friend was granted Euthanasia, and left his or her room for the homelessness that is beyond all human conception. Vashti did not much mind. After an unsuccessful lecture, she would sometimes ask for Euthanasia herself. But the death-rate was not permitted to exceed the birth-rate, and the Machine had hitherto refused it to her.

The troubles began quietly, long before she was conscious of them.

One day she was astonished at receiving a message from her son. They never communicated, having nothing in common, and she had only heard indirectly that he was still alive, and had been transferred from the northern hemisphere, where he had behaved so mischievously, to the southern – indeed, to a room not far from her own.

"Does he want me to visit him?" she thought. "Never again, never. And I have not the time."

No, it was madness of another kind.

He refused to visualise his face upon the blue plate, and speaking out of the darkness with solemnity said:

"The Machine stops."

"What do you say?"

"The Machine is stopping, I know it, I know the signs."

She burst into a peal of laughter. He heard her and was angry, and they spoke no more.

"Can you imagine anything more absurd?" she cried to a friend. "A man who was my son believes that the Machine is stopping. It would be impious if it was not mad."

"The Machine is stopping?" her friend replied. "What does that mean? The phrase conveys nothing to me."

…

It became difficult to read. A blight entered the atmosphere and dulled its luminosity. At times Vashti could scarcely see across her room. The air, too, was foul. Loud were the complaints, impotent the remedies, heroic the tone of the lecturer as he cried: "Courage! courage! What matter so long as the Machine goes on? To it the darkness and the light are one." And though things improved again after a time, the old brilliancy was never recaptured, and humanity never recovered from its entrance into twilight. There was an hysterical talk of "measures," of "provisional dictatorship," and the inhabitants of Sumatra were asked to familiarise themselves with the workings of the central power station, the said power station being situated in France. But for the most part panic reigned, and men spent their strength praying to their Books, tangible proofs of the Machine's omnipotence. There were gradations of terror – at times came rumours of hope – the Mending Apparatus was almost mended, the enemies of the Machine had been got under, new "nerve-centres" were evolving which would do the work even more magnificently than before. But there came a day when, without the slightest warning, without any previous hint of feebleness, the entire communication-system broke down, all over the world, and the world, as they understood it, ended.

Vashti was lecturing at the time and her earlier remarks had been punctuated with applause. As she proceeded the audience became silent, and at the conclusion there was no sound. Somewhat displeased, she called to a friend who was a specialist in sympathy. No sound: doubtless the friend was sleeping. And so with the next friend whom she tried to summon, and so with the next, until she remembered Kuno's cryptic remark, "The Machine stops".

The phrase still conveyed nothing. If Eternity was stopping it would of course be set going shortly.

For example, there was still a little light and air – the atmosphere had improved a few hours previously. There was still the Book, and while there was the Book there was security.

Then she broke down, for with the cessation of activity came an unexpected terror – silence.

…

She whirled around, praying to be saved from this, at any rate, kissing the Book, pressing button after button. The uproar outside was increasing, and even penetrated the wall. Slowly the brilliancy of her cell was dimmed, the reflections faded from the metal switches. Now she could not see the reading-stand, now not the Book, though she held it in her hand. Light followed the flight of sound, air was following light, and the original void returned to the cavern from which it has so long been excluded. Vashti continued to whirl, like the devotees of an earlier religion, screaming, praying, striking at the buttons with bleeding hands.

It was thus that she opened her prison and escaped – escaped in the spirit: at least so it seems to me, ere my meditation closes. That she escapes in the body – I cannot perceive that. She struck, by chance, the switch that released the door, and the rush of foul air on her skin, the loud throbbing whispers in her ears, told her that she was facing the tunnel again, and that tremendous platform on which she had seen men fighting. They were not fighting now. Only the whispers remained, and the little whimpering groans. They were dying by hundreds out in the dark.

She burst into tears.

Tears answered her.

…

"Where are you?" she sobbed.

His voice in the darkness said, "Here."

Is there any hope, Kuno?"

"None for us."

"Where are you?"

She crawled over the bodies of the dead. His blood spurted over her hands.

"Quicker," he gasped, "I am dying – but we touch, we talk, not through the Machine."

He kissed her.

"We have come back to our own. We die, but we have recaptured life, as it was in Wessex, when Ælfrid overthrew the Danes. We know what they know outside, they who dwelt in the cloud that is the colour of a pearl."

"But Kuno, is it true? Are there still men on the surface of the earth? Is this – tunnel, this poisoned darkness – really not the end?"

He replied:

"I have seen them, spoken to them, loved them. They are hiding in the midst and the ferns until our civilisation stops. Today they are the Homeless – tomorrow ----"

"Oh, tomorrow – some fool will start the Machine again, tomorrow."

"Never," said Kuno, "never. Humanity has learnt its lesson."

This is an excerpt from *"The Machine Stops"*, which was first published in the *Oxford and Cambridge Review* in 1909.

Documentaries

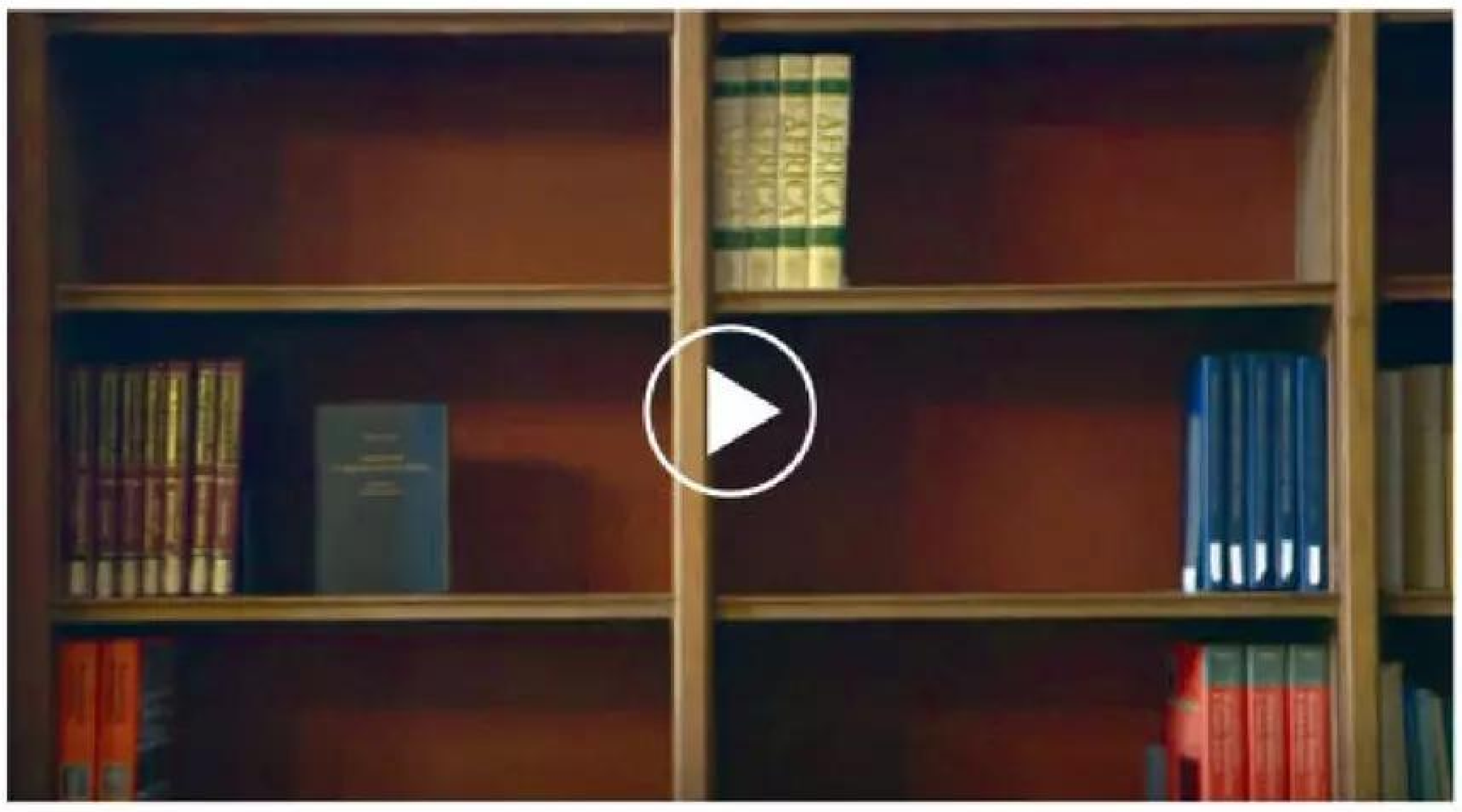
To view the documentaries below and many others, visit http://www.newphilosopher.com/videos/

Life 2.0

http://www.newphilosopher.com/?p=3118

Every day, across all corners of the globe, millions of users log on to Second Life, a virtual online world populated by lifelike avatars. *Life 2.0* follows a group of people whose lives are dramatically consumed by the virtual world of Second Life. They reside in this new reality, where inhabitants assume alternate personas in the form of avatars – with digital alter egos that can be sculpted and manipulated on a whim.

Digital Amnesia



http://www.newphilosopher.com/?p=3120

Focusing on the vulnerability of digital data, *Digital Amnesia* ponders the sustainability of modern artefacts that have no material state. Notable archivists share their perspectives on the Digital Age and whether or not it poses a great threat to the longevity of digital information and our collective memory.

AROUND THE WEB

A Philosophical Python

In this series of audio clips produced for the American Philosophical Association, John Cleese highlights why he thinks “the 21st century may belong far more to philosophy than to psychology or even traditional religion.” Topics range from ‘Meaning of Life’ to ‘Fear of Death’ and ‘What Philosophers Do’.

www.publicphilosophy.org/resources.html#cleese

DEVIL’S DICTIONARY

By Ambrose Bierce

INVENTOR, noun. A person who makes an ingenious arrangement of wheels, levers, and springs, and believes it civilisation.

> **“Slowly realise that everything is terrible: sadness. Quickly realise that everything is terrible: comedy.”**
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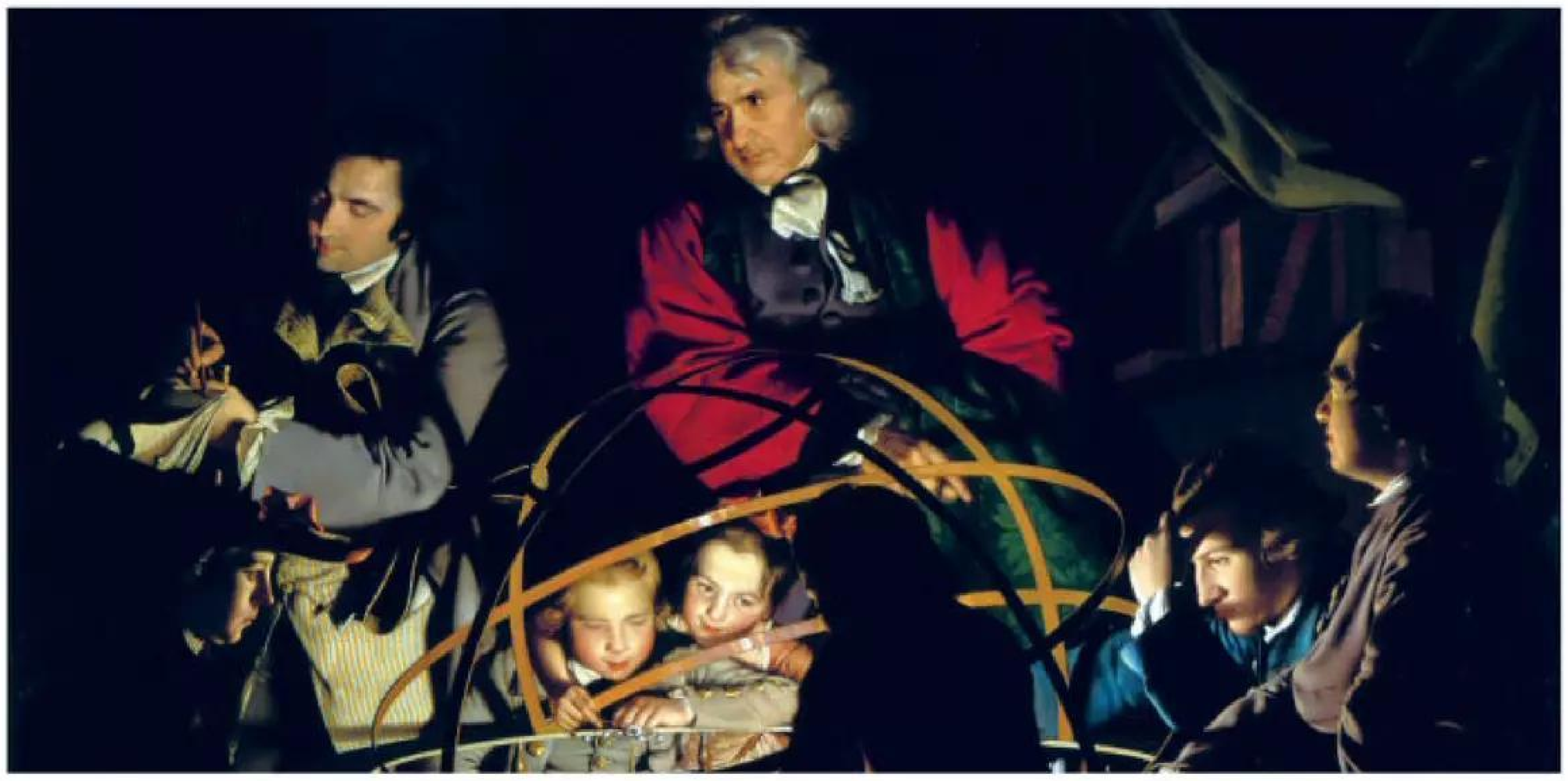
Philosophy of Technology



“According to Heidegger, not only did technology in the 20th century develop more rapidly than in previous times and by consequence became a more visible factor in everyday life, but also did the nature of technology itself at the same time undergo a profound change.” *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*

www.iep.utm.edu/technolo/

The Bookshelf

“Philosophy is the discipline concerned with questions of importance to us which we cannot answer through empirical observation.” If you’re interested in such questions, it’s hard to go past Project Gutenberg’s ‘Philosophy Bookshelf’, which has a range of texts freely available online – from Hume’s *A Treatise of Human Nature* to Nietzsche’s *Beyond Good and Evil*.

www.gutenberg.org/wiki/Philosophy_%28Bookshelf%29

Ask a Philosopher

‘Ask a Philosopher’ was launched in 1999 and philosophers have since responded to thousands of questions submitted from all over the world. Questions include “Where does time go?”, “What does Descartes mean by saying the ‘human mind is better known than the body’?”, and “Are you fated to do certain things with your life?”

www.philosophypathways.com/questions/index.html

What's on

Hay Festival

26 May – 5 June 2016

Hay-on-Wye, Wales

For 27 years Hay Festival has brought together writers from around the world to debate and share stories at its festival in the staggering beauty of the Welsh Borders. Hay celebrates great writing from poets and scientists, lyricists and comedians, novelists and environmentalists, and the power of great ideas to transform our way of thinking. Held over 11 days from the end of May, this festival is, in Bill Clinton's phrase, "The Woodstock of the mind".

www.hayfestival.com

London School of Philosophy

Throughout 2016

London, UK

Directed at the layperson, The London School of Philosophy subjects cover a range of fascinating topics for anyone interested in philosophy, from Philosophy of Love to Biology, Culture, and Human Behaviour. The summer term starts in April and classes start from £120, £90 for concessions.

www.londonschoolofphilosophy.org/

Sydney Writers' Festival

16 – 22 May 2016

Sydney, Australia

The Sydney Writers' Festival is a week-long celebration of the ideas and issues that stimulate the written word. This year's festival will bring together the best contemporary writers of fiction and non-fiction, including some of the world's leading intellectuals, scientists, and journalists. Join more than 80,000 people at over 300 events – half of which are free – in and around the wharves of Sydney Harbour.

www.swf.org.au/

Whether you're a budding philosopher or a bookworm, there are plenty of events to pique your interest, from Glasgow to Oregon.

IQ2 Debates

3 March, 3 May, 23 August

City Recital Hall, Sydney, Australia

The Ethics Centre hosts regular events and debates on a wide array of topical ethical issues – from the Intelligence Squared (IQ2) debates and in-house events to the annual Festival of Dangerous Ideas, which it co-curates in partnership with the Sydney Opera House. The events present a diversity of views to help people make informed decisions, giving practical effect to the Socratic ideal of an examined life.

www.ethics.org.au/events

INHUMANE
HUMANITY

West End Festival

3 – 26 June

Glasgow, Scotland

The West End Festival is Glasgow's largest cultural event and every June it takes over this popular area of Glasgow with a wide variety of events and performances, showcasing over 400 events in 80 venues.

www.westendfestival.co.uk

Oregon Shakespeare Festival

19 February – 30 October

Ashland, OR, USA

The Oregon Shakespeare Festival season runs from February through early November and has three theatres: two indoor stages and the outdoor Allen Elizabethan Theatre, which opens in early June and runs through mid-October. There are 11 different plays that include three or four by Shakespeare and seven by other classic writers, as well as modern and contemporary work and world premieres.

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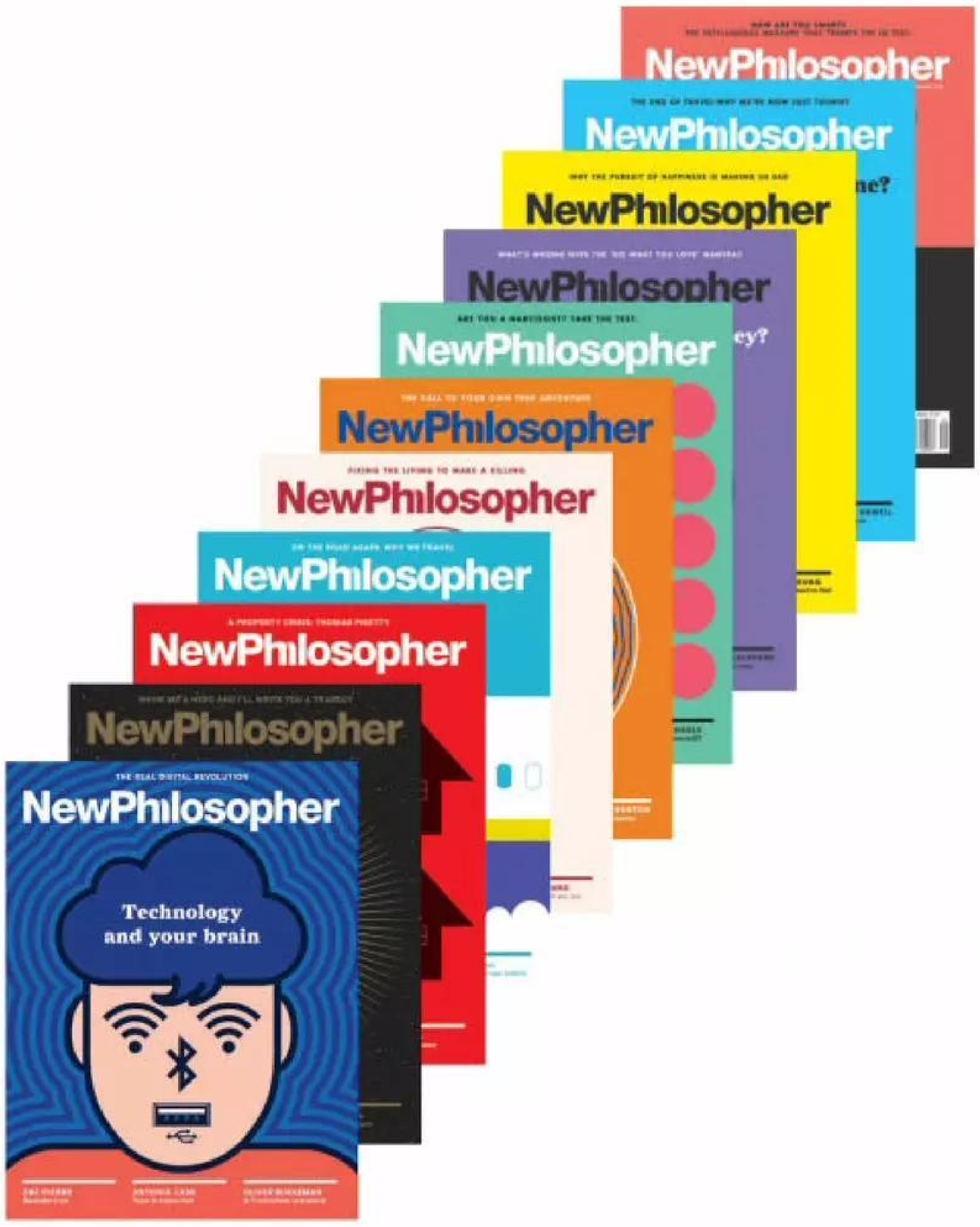

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I love this magazine. I no longer like reading or listening to mainstream news as it is not good for my health. Your magazine is good for me. It has real discussions that relate to life rather than reporting sensational 'news'. Thank you.

TESTIMONIALS

This publication is bright, simple, clear, and thought-provoking – deserves high praise.

Your magazine is so helpful and is churning up the little grey cells, as Hercule Poirot says.

Great magazine. Finally one worth reading. Will recommend it to all friends.

Extraordinary quality in all respects… *New Philosopher* is one of the best things happening.

A magazine that treats its audience as intellectual equals, that doesn't insult their intelligence by simplifying or manipulating concepts or appealing to crass consumerism as do the most of the publications out there. Thank you for creating something that brings philosophy out of the sandstone universities and into our lounge rooms without losing its depth or critical stance.

You have introduced such a wonderfully fresh & intelligent publication to expand our minds & hearts. Thank you.

I feel like I have been waiting for this magazine all my life.

In a country so defined by the shallow crass, propaganda and cognitive conformity coming out of its papers, magazines, and broadcasters, yours is a true gem. You have no idea how happy I was to discover it, it has given me hope for the future of this country's media landscape and for the public discussion emanating from it.

I have to say that is a tremendous relief and joy that your publication has arrived... your magazine provides oxygen to the soul. I have often felt alone, alienated or old-fashioned in my outlook but now know I have a soulmate to reflect and take action with, namely *New Philosopher*.

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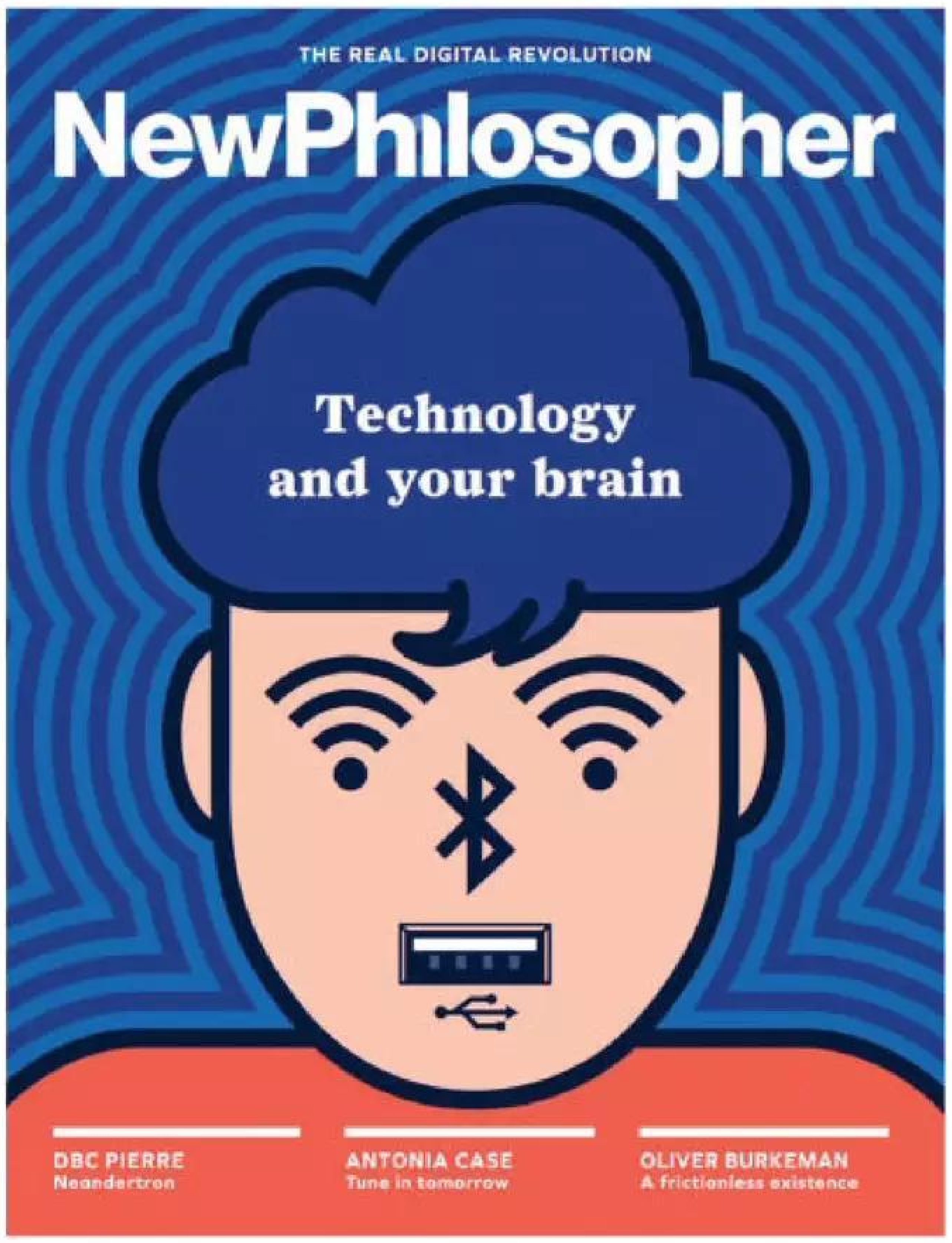
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How far are we from *1984* today? Well, our televisions are now capable of eavesdropping on private conversations in our lounge rooms.

BIG BROTHER
VOUS
REGARDE

Photo: Pat Erm

The thought police

by André Dao

"For whom, it suddenly occurred to him to wonder, was he writing this diary?" This is the question that confronts Winston Smith, the doomed hero of George Orwell's *1984*. Faced with life in a world of constant and total surveillance, in which telescreens in every room can pick up sounds above a very low whisper and Thought Police patrol the corridors of the mind, Winston hopes to carve out a little oasis free from observation by writing down his memories and feelings in an old, obsolete notebook.

As for his audience, Winston thinks at first of the abstract: "For the future, for the unborn." But eventually he settles on a more concrete reader – O'Brien, a colleague with whom he feels a mysterious, unspoken connection. Unfortunately for Winston, his diary is far from private, and O'Brien, rather than being Winston's imagined sympathiser, turns out to be his torturer-in-chief. Indeed, O'Brien's interrogation of Winston is punctuated with the phrase, "Do you remember writing in your diary" X or Y, as if to hammer home the sheer naïvety of believing that anything – any action or thought – could be hidden from Big Brother's gaze. As Winston himself comes to realise, "for seven years the Thought Police had watched him like a beetle under a magnifying glass. There was no physical act, no word spoken aloud, that they had not noticed, no train of thought that they had not been able to infer."

How far are we from *1984* today? Well, our televisions are now capable of eavesdropping on private conversations in our lounge rooms. Our emails – in which we might discuss our health, our love lives, our secret hopes and fears – are read by computer algorithms and the data sold to ever more intrusive advertisers. CCTV is ubiquitous. And governments around the world are now collecting unimaginable amounts of metadata on their own citizens.

This latest development might be the most insidious, at least in part because so few of us understand what metadata is, let alone why it might be important that it be kept private. Edward Snowden, the whistleblower who revealed the extent of the US National Security Agency's spying program, has suggested that we can demystify metadata by referring to it by what it actually is – a record of our activity. Metadata can include the names of people you email, the subject of those emails, and the time you sent them. It can reveal who you call, for how long, and where you each were for the conversation. If you have a smartphone, it will likely reveal places you have visited, and if you use the Internet, it will reveal the sites you visit and when.

From all this information, governments can form a surprisingly clear picture of your life: who your friends are, where you go, what you're interested in. In turn, like the Thought Police in *1984*, governments can infer thoughts and intentions from all this accumulated data.

But perhaps you're thinking to yourself, I've done nothing wrong – I have nothing to hide. Snowden, who knows more than a little what it means to lose your privacy, has said that "arguing that you don't care about the right to privacy because you have nothing to hide is no different than saying you don't care about free speech because you have nothing to say." To put it another way, it may be that we need private spaces in which we can flourish and lead full, dignified lives. Perhaps it was this need for a space all of his own that moved Winston to open the diary in the first place. The question is, are there any such spaces for us today?

13 questions:

Tim Soutphommasane

interview by Zan Boag

Tim Soutphommasane is the Race Discrimination Commissioner at the Australian Human Rights Commission, the author of four books, and a political philosopher.

If you could change one thing about the world, what would that be?
Inequality. The world becomes a harsher and more dangerous place when the gap between the rich and the poor, the strong and the weak, grows too large.

What illusion do you suffer from?
I believe in historical progress. Some say that is an illusion.

What is your demon?
The fear that I have not done enough.

What is the most important part of your education?
Knowing the value of clarity. If you can't explain something simply, you probably don't understand it well enough.

If you could choose, what would you have for your last meal?
Roast duck.

Which 'technology' has had the most profound influence on humans?
Steel.

The question you'd most like to ask others?
Whom do you fear most?

What is your motto?
Effortless superiority (the unofficial motto of my Oxford college, Balliol).

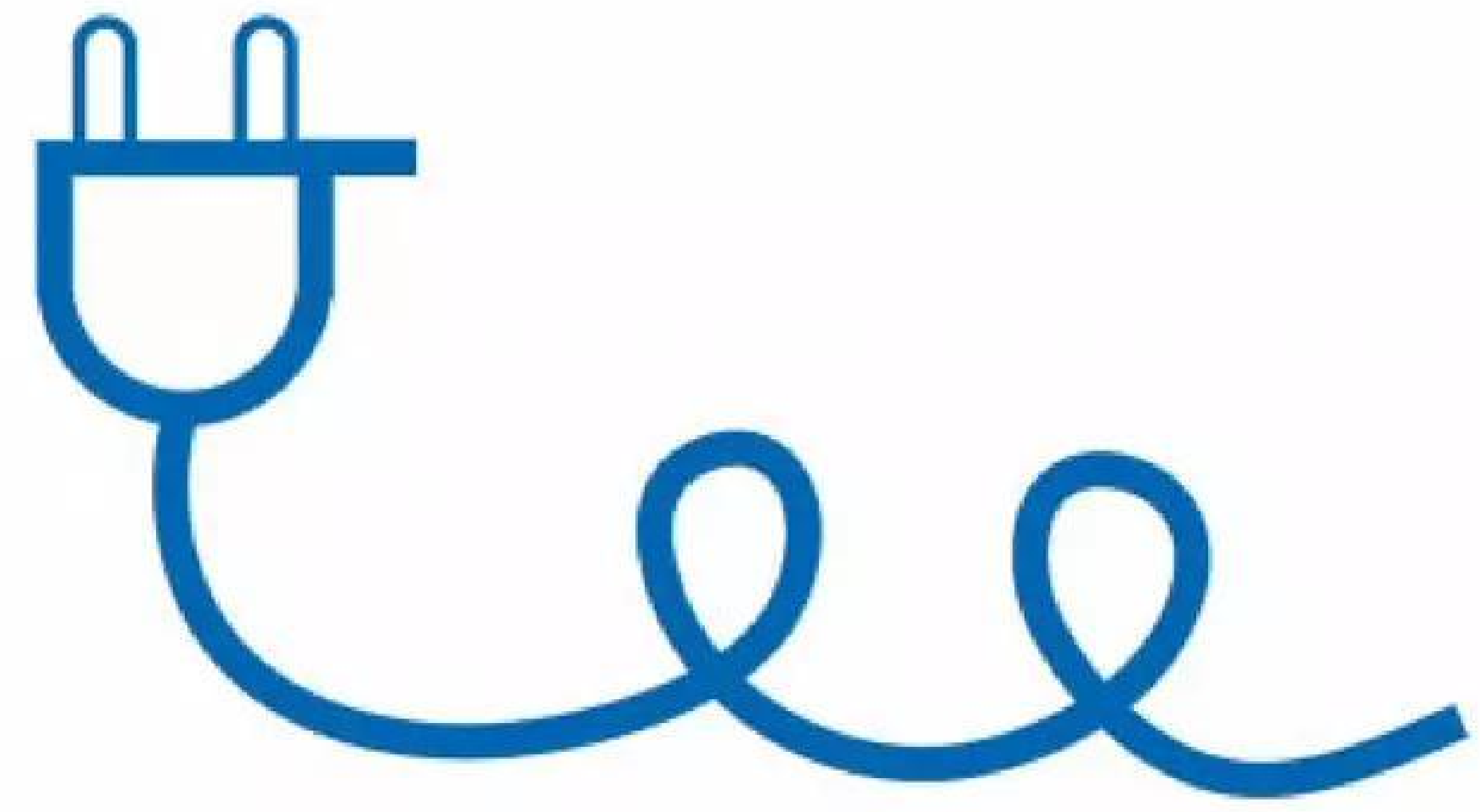
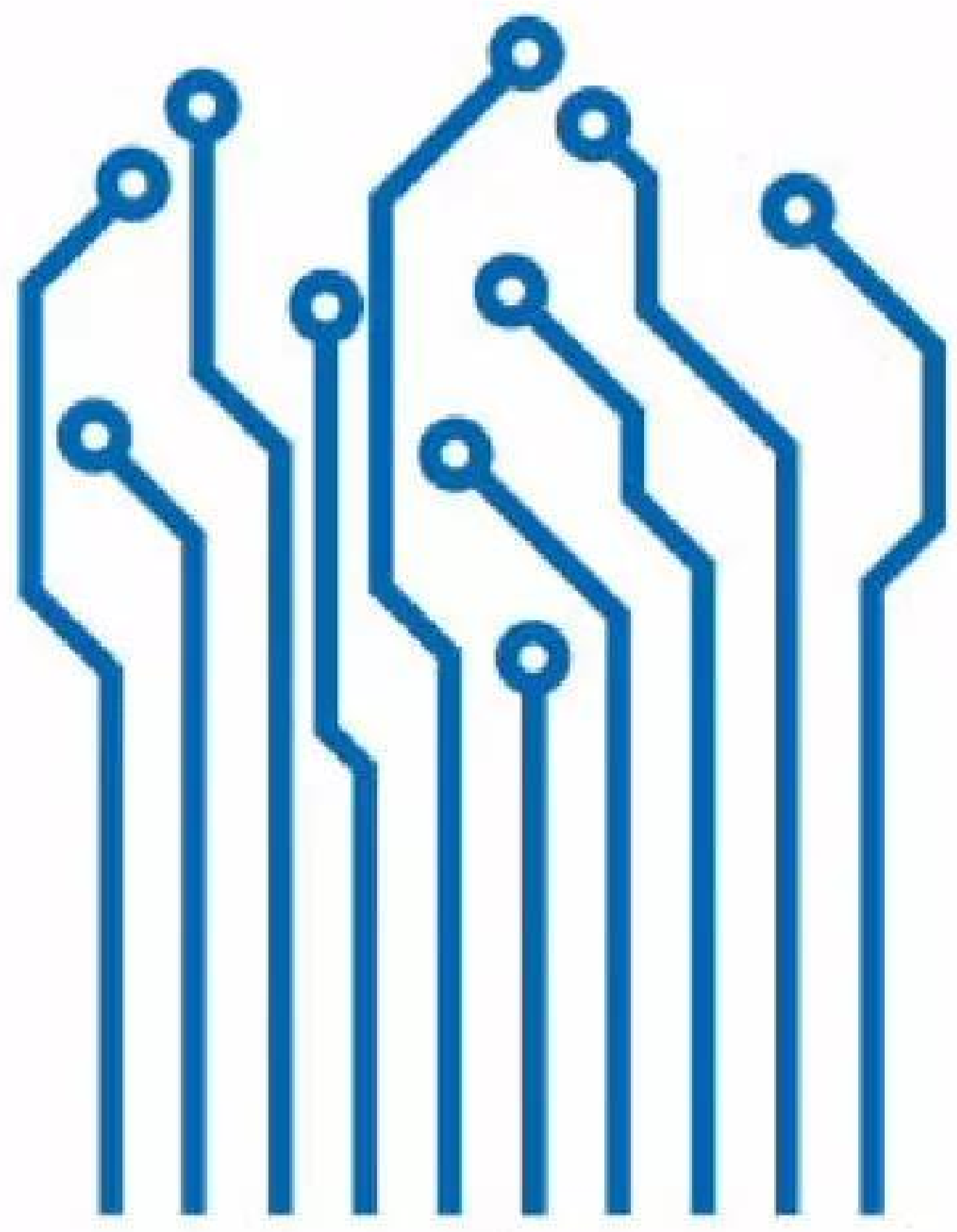
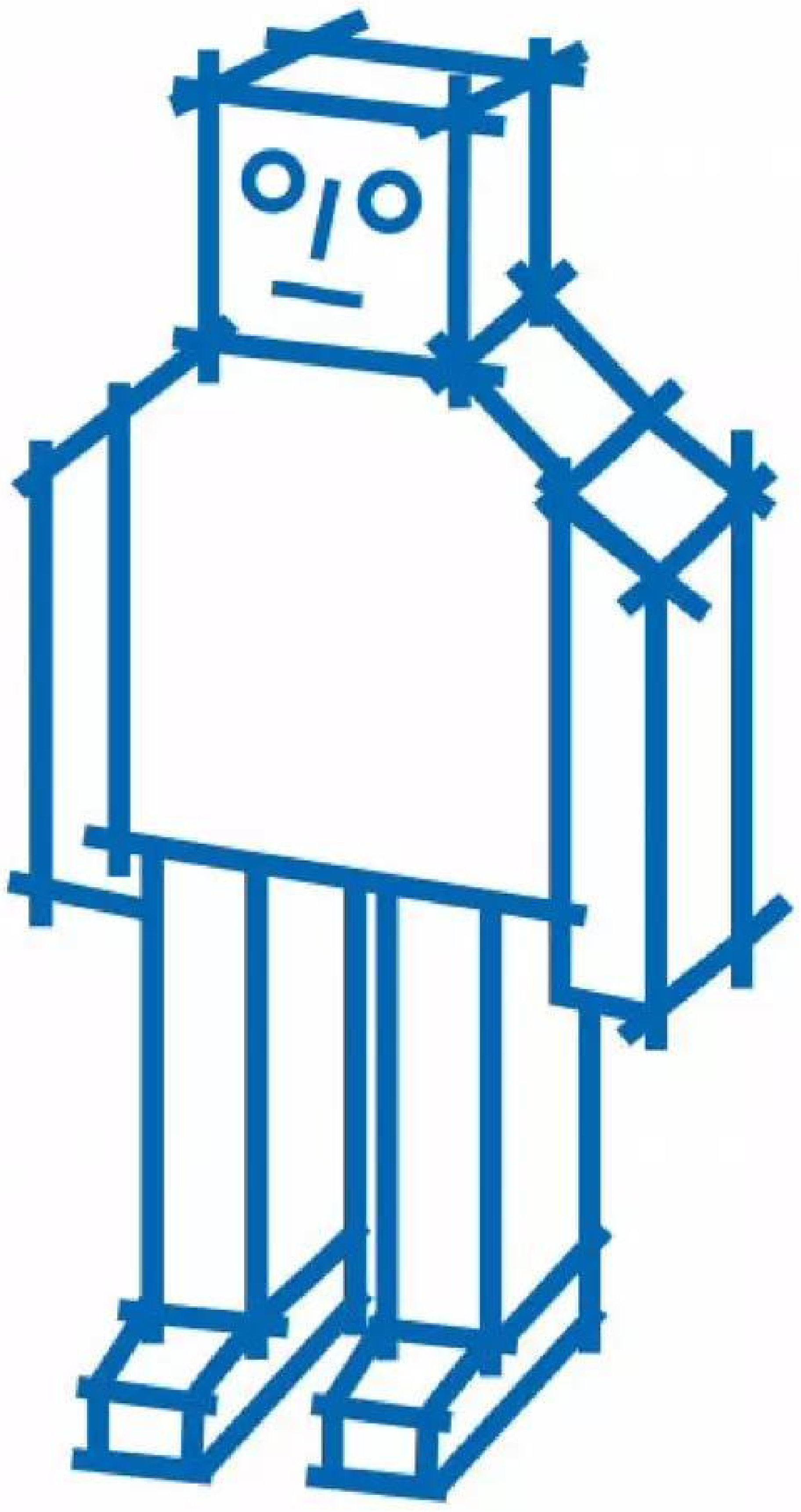
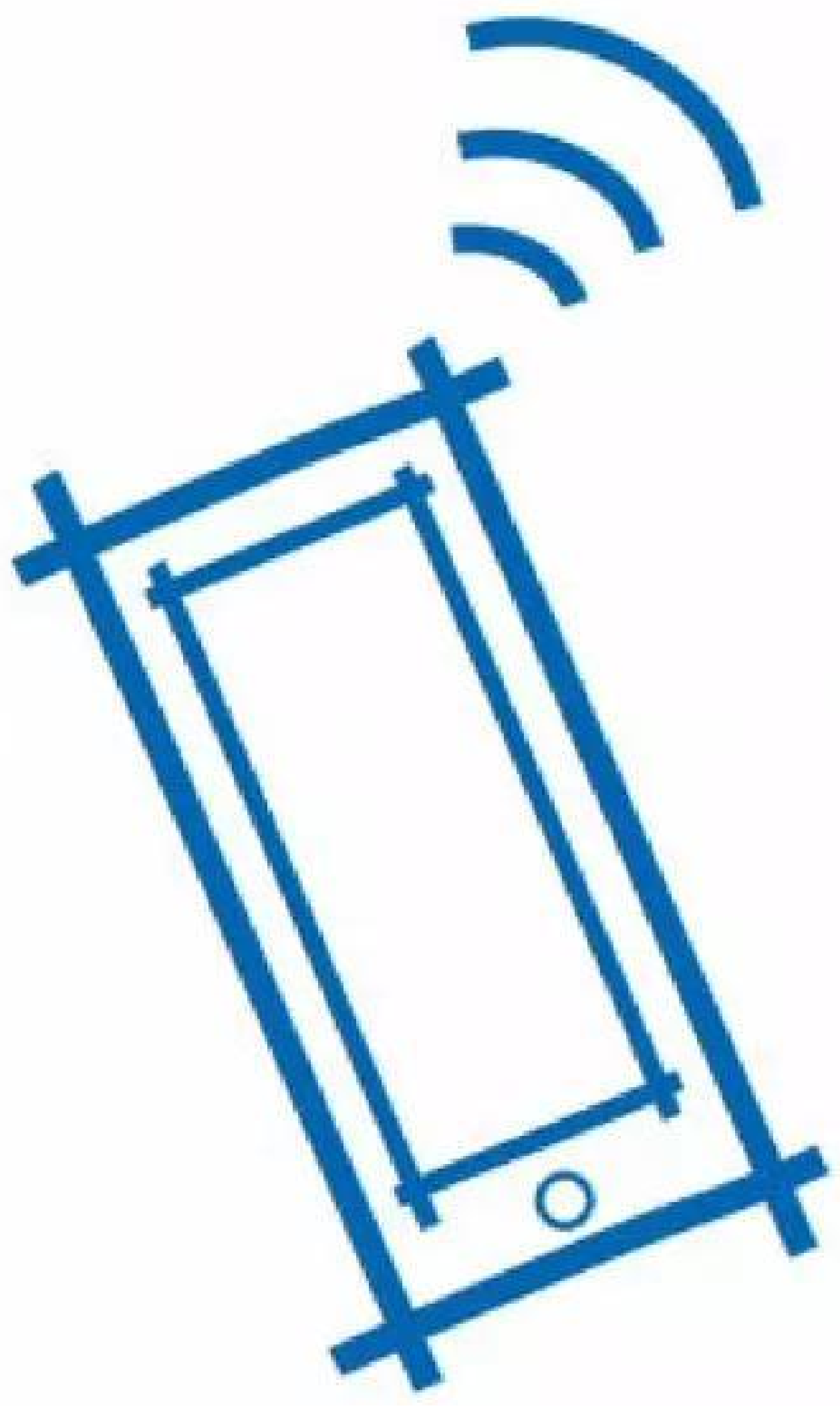
Your favourite word?
Dilettante.

Which thinker has had the greatest influence on your life?
Charles Taylor.

What is a good death?
Dying as one lived – hopefully with dignity and surrounded by love.

What do people accuse you of?
Having an agenda (who doesn't?).

What is the meaning of life?
Knowing how to handle disappointment.

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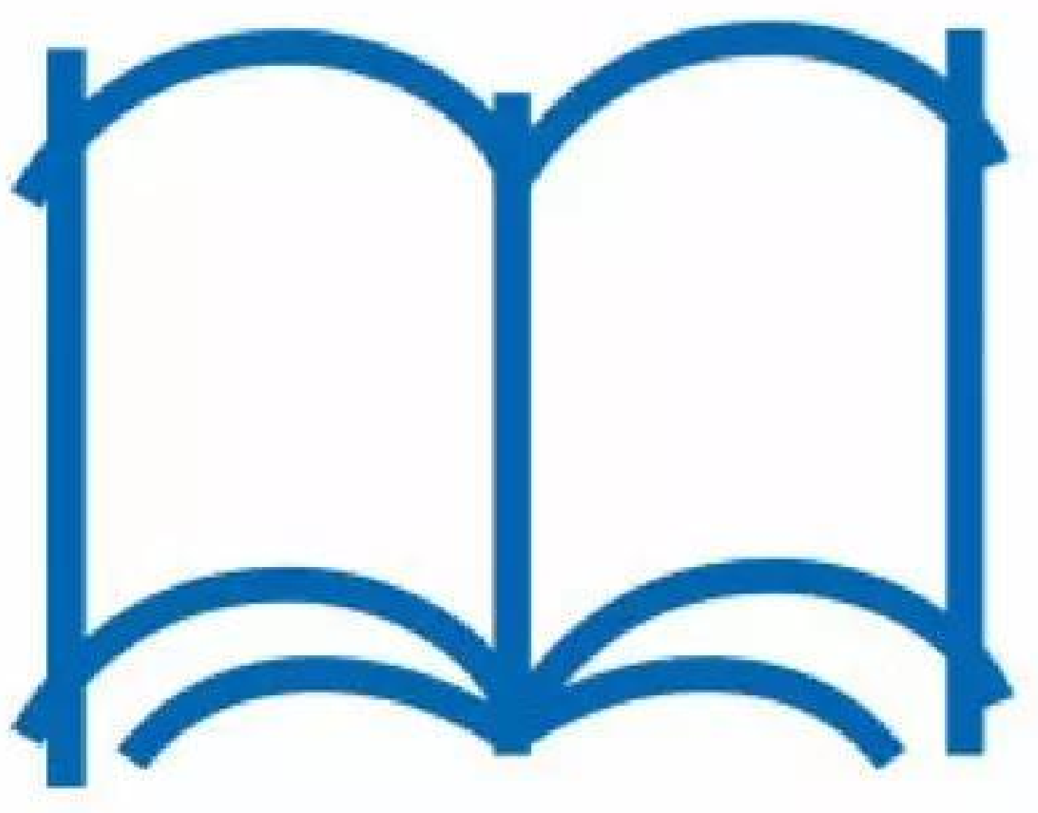

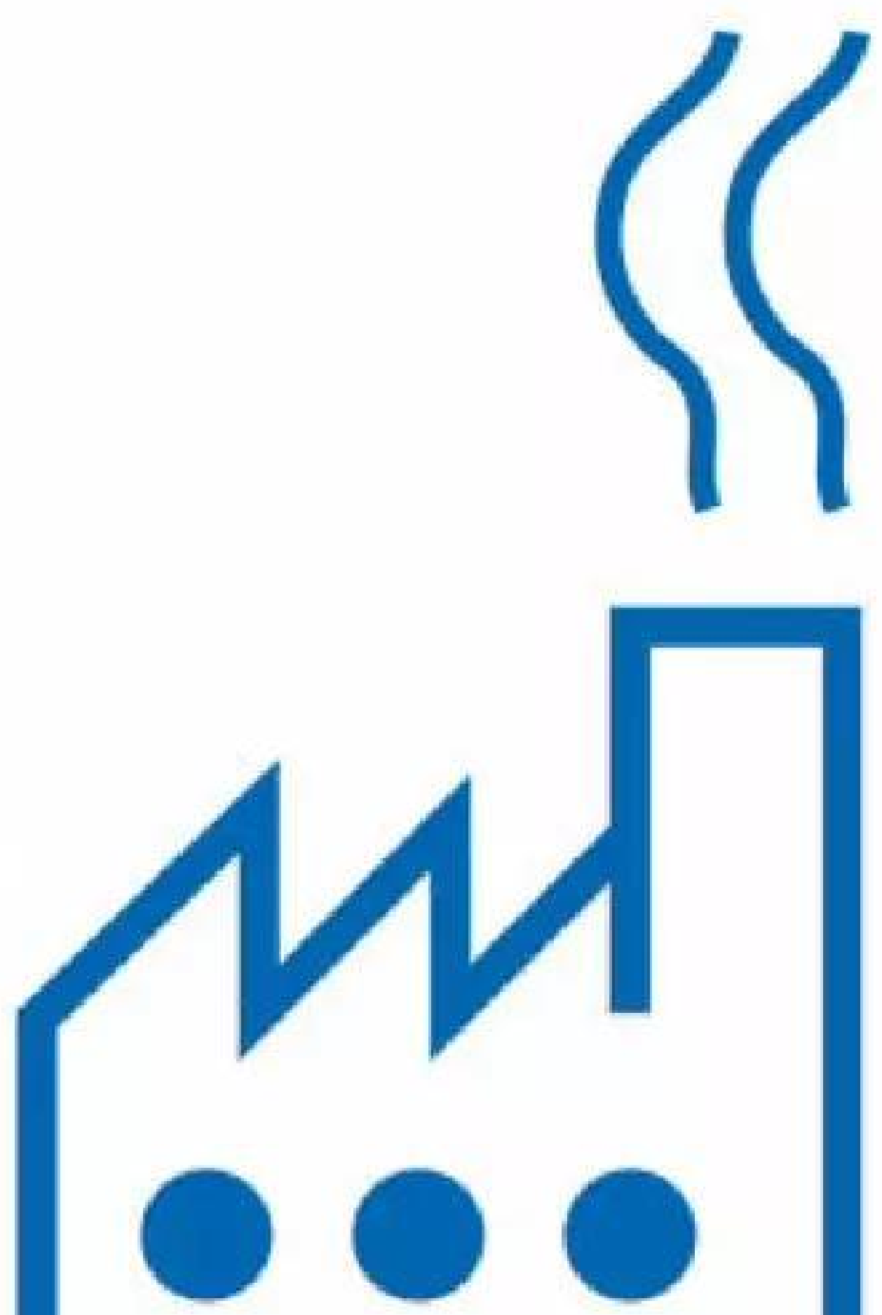
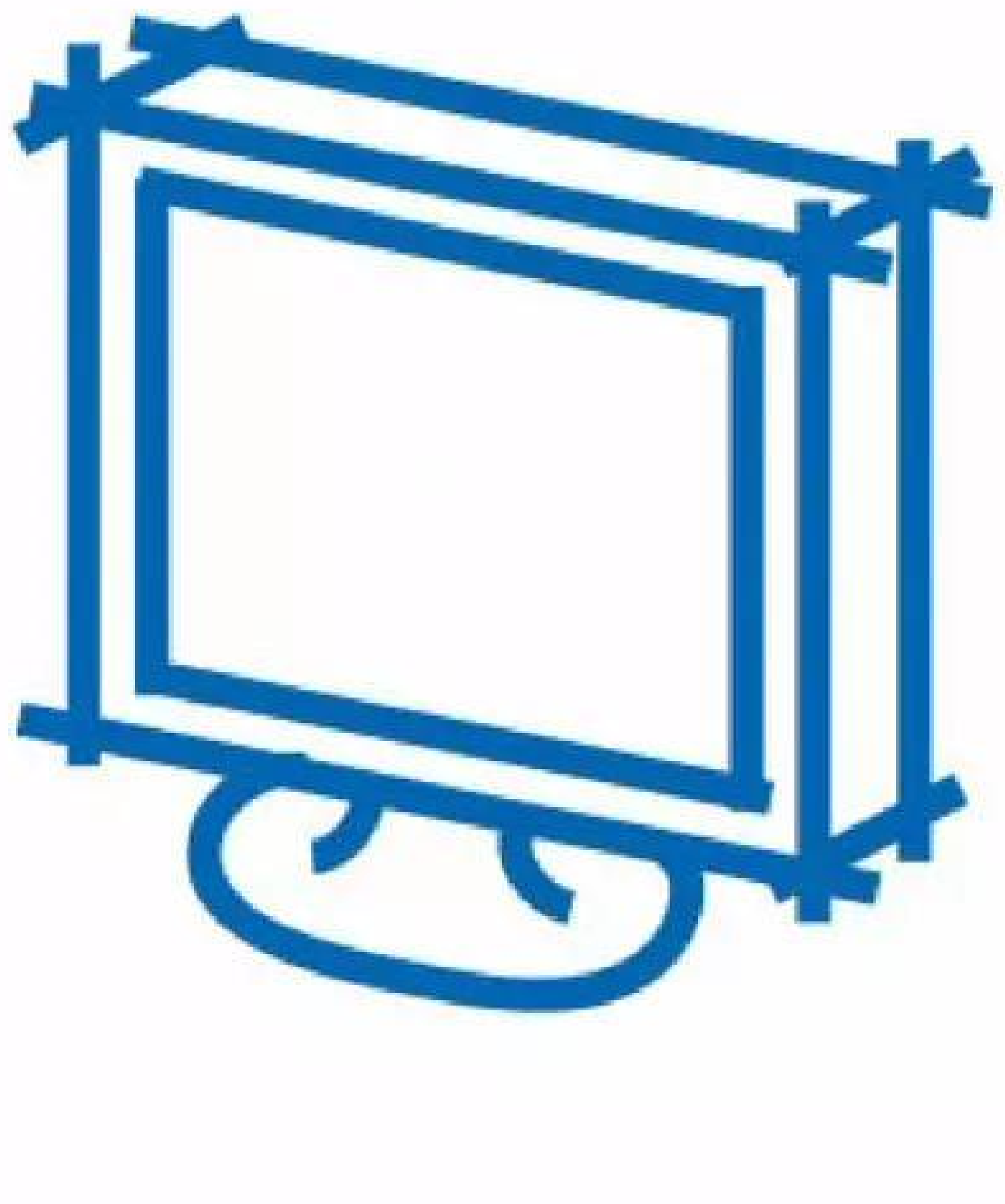

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